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—A Tale of a Lonely Parish

THE NOVELS OF
F. MARION CRAWFORD

In Twenty-five Volumes — Authorized Edition

A Tale of a Lonely Parish

BY

F. MARION CRAWFORD

WITH FRONTISPIECE

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A TALE OF A LONELY PARISH

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TO

My Mother

I DEDICATE THIS TALE

A MEAN TOKEN OF A LIFELONG AFFECTION

SORRENTO, *Christmas Day*, 1885

A TALE OF A LONELY PARISH.

CHAPTER I.

The Reverend Augustin Ambrose would gladly have given up taking pupils. He was growing old and his sight was beginning to trouble him; he was very weary of Thucydides, of Homer, of the works of Mr. Todhunter of which the green bindings expressed a hope still unrealised, of conic sections — even of his beloved Horace. He was tired of the stupidities of the dull young men who were sent to him because they could not "keep up," and he had long ceased to be surprised or interested by the remarks of the clever ones who were sent to him because their education had not prepared them for an English University. The dull ones could never be made to understand anything, though Mr. Ambrose generally succeeded in making them remember enough to matriculate, by dint of ceaseless repetition and a system of *memoria technica* which embraced most things necessary to the salvation of dull youth. The clever ones, on the other hand, generally lacked altogether the solid foundation of learning; they could construe fluently but did not know a long syllable from a short one; they had vague notions of elemental algebra and no notion at all of arithmetic, but

did very well in conic sections; they knew nothing of prosody, but dabbled perpetually in English blank verse; altogether they knew most of those things which they need not have known and they knew none of those things thoroughly which they ought to have known. After twenty years of experience Mr. Ambrose ascertained that it was easier to teach a stupid boy than a clever one, but that he would prefer not to teach at all.

Unfortunately the small tithes of a small country parish in Essex did not furnish a sufficient income for his needs. He had been a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, within a few years of taking his degree, wherein he had obtained high honours. But he had married and had found himself obliged to accept the first living offered to him, to wit, the vicarage of Billingsfield, whereof his college held the rectory and received the great tithes. The entire income he obtained from his cure never at any time exceeded three hundred and forty-seven pounds, and in the year when it reached that high figure there had been an unusually large number of marriages. It was not surprising that the vicar should desire to improve his circumstances by receiving one or two pupils. He had married young, as has been said, and there had been children born to him, a son and a daughter. Mrs. Ambrose was a good manager and a good mother, and her husband had worked hard. Between them they had brought up their children exceedingly well. The son had in his turn entered the church, had exhibited a faculty of pushing his way which had not characterised his father, had got a curacy in a fashionable Yorkshire watering-place, and was thought to be on the way to obtain a first-rate living. In the

course of time, too, the daughter had lost her heart to a young physician who had brilliant prospects and some personal fortune, and the Reverend Augustin Ambrose had given his consent to the union. Nor had he been disappointed. The young physician had risen rapidly in his profession, had been elected a member of the London College, had transferred himself to the capital and now enjoyed a rising practice in Chelsea. So great was his success that it was thought he would before long purchase the goodwill of an old practitioner who dwelt in the neighbourhood of Brompton Crescent, and who, it was said, might shortly be expected to retire.

It will be seen, therefore, that if Mr. Ambrose's life had not been very brilliant, his efforts had on the whole been attended with success. His children were both happy and independent and no longer needed his assistance or support; his wife, the excellent Mrs. Ambrose, enjoyed unfailing health and good spirits; he himself was still vigorous and active, and as yet found no difficulty in obtaining a couple of pupils at two hundred pounds a year each, for he had early got a reputation for successfully preparing young gentlemen with whom no other private tutor could do anything, and he had established the scale of his prices accordingly. It is true that he had sacrificed other things for the sake of imparting tuition, and more than once he had hesitated and asked himself whether he should go on. Indeed, when he graduated, it was thought that he would soon make himself remarkable by the publication of some scholarly work; it was foretold that he might become a famous preacher; it was asserted that he was a general favourite with the Fellows of Trinity and would

get a proportionately fat living — but he had committed the unpardonable sin of allowing his chances of fortune to slip from him. He had given up his fellowship, had married and had accepted an insignificant country living. He asked nothing, and he got nothing. He never attracted the notice of his bishop by doing anything extraordinary, nor the notice of the public by appearing in print. He baptized, married and buried the people of Billingsfield, Essex, and he took private pupils. He wrote a sermon once a fortnight, and revised old ones for the other three occasions out of four. His sermons were good in their way, but were intended for simple folk and did no justice to the powers he had certainly possessed in his youth. Indeed, as years went on, the dry routine of his life produced its inevitable effect upon his mind, and the productions of Mr. Ambrose grew to be exceedingly commonplace; and the more commonplace he became, the more he regretted having done so little with the faculties he enjoyed, and the more weary he became of the daily task of galvanising the dull minds of his pupils into a spasmodic activity, just sufficient to leap the ditch that separates the schoolboy from the undergraduate. He had not only educated his children and seen them provided for in the world; he had also saved a little money, and he had insured his life for five hundred pounds. There was no longer any positive necessity for continuing to teach, as there had been thirty years ago, when he first married.

So much for the circumstances of the Reverend Augustin Ambrose. Personally he was a man of good presence, five feet ten inches in height, active and strong, of a ruddy complexion with smooth, thick

grey hair and a plentiful grey beard. He shaved his upper lip however, greatly to the detriment of his appearance, for the said upper lip was very long and the absence of the hirsute appendage showed a very large mouth with very thin lips, generally compressed into an expression of remarkable obstinacy. His nose was both broad and long and his grey eyes were bright and aggressive in their glance. As a matter of fact Mr. Ambrose was combative by nature, but his fighting instincts seem to have been generally employed in the protection of rights he already possessed, rather than in pushing on in search of fresh fields of activity. He was an active man, fond of walking alone and able to walk any distance he pleased; a charitable man with the charity peculiar to people of exceedingly economical tendencies and possessing small fixed incomes. He would give himself vast personal trouble to assist distress, as though aware that since he could not give much money to the poor he was bound to give the best of himself. The good Mrs. Ambrose seconded him in this as in all his works; labouring hard when hard work could do any good, but giving material assistance with a sparing hand. It sufficiently defines the two to say that although many a surly labourer in the parish grumbled that the vicar and his wife were "oncommon near," when money was concerned, there was nevertheless no trouble in which their aid was not invoked and their advice asked. But the indigent labourer not uncommonly retrieved his position by asking a shilling of one of the young gentlemen at the vicarage, who were generally open-handed, good-looking boys, blessed with a great deal more money than brains.

At the time when this tale opens, however, it chanced that one of the two young gentlemen at the vicarage was by no means in the position peculiar to the majority of youths who sought the good offices of the Reverend Augustin Ambrose. John Short, aged eighteen, was in all respects a remarkable contrast to his companion the Honourable Cornelius Angleside. John Short was apparently very poor; the Honourable Cornelius on the other hand had plenty of money. Short was undeniably clever; Angleside was uncommonly dull. Short was the son of a decayed literary man; Angleside was the son of a nobleman. Short was by nature a hard worker; Angleside was amazingly idle. Short meant to do something in the world; Angleside had early determined to do nothing.

It would not be easy to define the reasons which induced Mr. Ambrose to receive John Short under his roof. He had never before taken a pupil on any but his usual terms, and at his time of life it was strange that he should break through the rule. But here his peculiar views of charity came into play. Short's father had been his own chum at school, and his friend at college, but had failed to reap any substantial benefits from his education. He had been a scholar in his way, but his way had not been the way of other scholars, and when he had gone up for honours he had got a bad third in classics. He would not enter the church, he could not enter the law, he had no interest whatever, and he found himself naturally thrust into the profession of literature. For a time he had nearly starved; then he had met with some success and had, of course, married without hesitation; after this he had had more misfortunes.

His wife had died leaving him an only son, whom in course of time he had sent to school. But school was too expensive and he had reluctantly taken the boy home again. It was in a fit of despair that he wrote to his old friend Augustin Ambrose, asking his advice. The Reverend Augustin considered the matter with the assistance of his wife, and being charitable souls, they determined that they must help Short to educate his son. Accordingly the vicar of Billingsfield wrote to his old friend to say that if he could manage to pay a small sum for the lad's board, he, the vicar, would complete the boy's education, so that he might at least have a chance in the world. Short accepted the offer with boundless gratitude and had hitherto not failed to pay the vicar the small sum agreed upon. The result of all this was that Mr. Ambrose had grown very fond of John, and John had derived great advantage from his position. He possessed precisely what his father had lacked, namely a strong bent in one direction, and there was no doubt that he would distinguish himself if he had a chance. That chance the vicar had determined to give him. He had made up his mind that his old friend's son should go to college and show what he was able to do. It was not an easy thing to manage, but the vicar had friends in Cambridge and John had brains; moreover the vicar and John were both very obstinate people and had both determined upon the same plan, so that there was a strong probability of their succeeding.

John Short was eighteen years of age, neither particularly good-looking nor by any means the reverse. He had what bankers commonly call a lucky face; that is to say he had a certain very prepossessing

look of honesty in his blue eyes, and a certain look of energetic goodwill in his features. When he was much older and wore a beard he passed for a handsome man, but at eighteen he could only boast the smallest of fair whiskers, and when anybody took the trouble to look long at him, which was not often, the verdict was that his jaw was too heavy and his mouth too obstinate. In complexion he was fair, and healthy to look at, generally sunburned in the summer, for he had a habit of reading out of doors; his laugh was very pleasant, though it was rarely heard; his eyes were honest but generally thoughtful; his frame was sturdy and already inclined rather to strength than to graceful proportion; his head matched his body well, being broad and well-shaped with plenty of prominence over the brows and plenty of fulness above the temples. He had a way of standing as though it would not be easy to move him, and a way of expressing his opinion which seemed to challenge contradiction. But he was not a combative boy. If any one argued with him, it soon appeared that he was not really argumentative, but merely enthusiastic. It was not necessary to agree with him, and there was small use in contradicting him. The more he talked the more enthusiastic he grew as he developed his own views; until seeing that he was not understood or that he was merely laughed at, he would end his discourse with a merry laugh at himself, or a shy apology for having talked so much. But the vicar assured his wife that the boy's Greek and Latin verses were something very extraordinary indeed, and much better than his own in his best days. For John was passionately fond of the classics and did

not propose to acquire any more mathematical knowledge than was strictly necessary for his matriculation and "little-go." He meant to be a famous scholar and he meant to get a fellowship at his college in order to be perfectly independent and to help his father.

John was a constant source of wonder to his companion the Honourable Cornelius Angleside, who remembered to have seen fellows of that sort at Eton but had never got near enough to them to know what they were really like. Cornelius had a vague idea that there was some trick about appearing to know so much and that those reading chaps were awful humbugs. How the trick was performed he did not venture to explain, but he was as firmly persuaded that it was managed by some species of conjuring as that Messrs. Maskelyne and Cook performed their wonders by sleight of hand. That one human brain should actually contain the amount of knowledge John Short appeared to possess was not credible to the Honourable Cornelius, and the latter spent more of his time in trying to discover how John "did it" than in trying to "do it" himself. Nevertheless, young Angleside liked Short after his own fashion, and Short did not dislike Angleside. John's father had given him to understand that as a general rule persons of wealth and good birth were a set of overbearing, purse-proud bullies, who considered men of genius to be little better than a set of learned monkeys, certainly not good enough to black their boots. For John's father in his misfortunes had imbibed sundry radical notions formerly peculiar to poor literary men, and not yet altogether extinct, and he had accordingly warned his son that all mammon was

the mammon of unrighteousness, and that the people who possessed it were the natural enemies of people who had to live by their brains. But John had very soon discovered that though Cornelius Angleside possessed the three qualifications for perdition, in the shape of birth, wealth and ignorance, against which his poor father railed unceasingly, he succeeded nevertheless in making himself very good company. Angleside was not overbearing, he was not purse-proud and he was not a bully. On the contrary he was unobtrusive and sufficiently simple in manner, and he certainly never mentioned the subject of his family or fortune; John rather pitied him, on the whole, until he began to discover that Angleside looked up to him on account of his mental superiority, and then John, being very human, began to like him.

The life at the vicarage of Billingsfield, Essex, was not remarkable for anything but its extreme regularity. Prayers, breakfast, work, lunch, a walk, work, dinner, work, prayers, bed. The programme never varied, save as the seasons introduced some change in the hours of the establishment. The vicar, who was fond of a little gardening and amused himself with a variety of experiments in the laying of asparagus beds, found occasional excitement in the pursuit of a stray cat which had managed to climb his wire netting and get at the heads of his favourite vegetable, in which thrilling chase he was usually aided by an old brown retriever answering, when he answered at all, to the name of Carlo, and by the Honourable Cornelius, whose skill in throwing stones was as phenomenal as his ignorance of Latin quantities. The play was invariably opened by old Rey-

nolds, the ancient and bow-legged gardener, groom and man of all work at the vicarage.

"Please sir, there's Simon Gunn's cat in the sparrergrass." The information was accompanied by a sort of chuckle of evil satisfaction which at once roused the sleeping passions of the Reverend Augustin Ambrose.

"Dear me, Reynolds, then why don't you turn her out?" and without waiting for an answer, the excellent vicar would spring from his seat and rush down the lawn in the direction of the beds, closely followed by the Honourable Cornelius, who picked up stones from the gravel path as he ran, and whose long legs made short work of the iron fence at the bottom of the garden. Meanwhile the aged Reynolds let Carlo loose from the yard and the hunt was prosecuted with great boldness and ingenuity. The vicar's object was to get the cat out of the asparagus bed as soon as possible without hurting her, for he was a humane man and would not have hurt a fly. Cornelius, on the other hand, desired the game to last as long as possible, and endeavoured to prevent the cat's escape by always hitting the wire netting at the precise spot where she was trying to get over it. In this way he would often succeed in getting as much as half an hour's respite from Horace. At last the vicar, panting with his exertions and bathed in perspiration, would protest against the form of assault.

"Really, Angleside," he would say, "I believe I could throw straighter myself. I'm quite sure Carlo can get her out if you leave him alone."

Whereupon Cornelius would put his hands in his pockets and look on, and in a few minutes, when the

cat had been driven out and the vicar's back was turned, he would slip a sixpence into old Reynold's hand, and follow his tutor reluctantly back to the study. Whether there was any connection between the cat and the sixpence is uncertain, but during the last months of Angleside's stay at the vicarage the ingenuity of Simon Gunn's yellow cat in getting over the wire netting reached such a pitch that the vicar began to prepare a letter to the Bishop Stortford *Chronicle* on the relations generally existing between cats and asparagus beds.

Another event in the life of the vicarage was the periodical lameness of the vicar's strawberry mare, followed by the invariable discovery that George Horsnell the village blacksmith had run a nail into her foot when he shoed her last. Invariably, also, the vicar threatened that in future the mare should be shod by Hawkins the rival blacksmith, who was a dissenter and had consequently never been employed by the vicarage. Moreover it was generally rumoured once every year that old Nat Barker, the octogenarian cripple who had not been able to stand upon his feet for twenty years, was at the point of death. He invariably recovered, however, in time to put in an appearance by proxy at the distribution of a certain dole of a loaf and a shilling on boxing day. It was told also that in remote times the Puckeridge hounds had once come that way and that the fox had got into the churchyard. A repetition of this stirring event was anxiously looked for during many years, every time that the said pack met within ten miles of Billingsfield, but hitherto it had been looked for in vain. On the whole the life at the vicarage was not eventful, and the studies of the two young men who

imbibed learning at the feet of the Reverend Augustin Ambrose were rarely interrupted.

Mrs. Ambrose herself represented the feminine element in the society of the little place. The new doctor was a strange man, suspected of being a free-thinker, and he was not married. The Hall, for there was a Hall at Billingsfield, was uninhabited, and had been uninhabited for years. The estate which belonged to it was unimportant and moreover was in Chancery and seemed likely to stay there, for reasons no one ever mentioned at Billingsfield, because no one knew anything about them. From time to time a legal looking personage drove up to the Duke's Head, which was kept by Mr. Abraham Boosey, who was also undertaker to the parish, and which was thought to be a very good inn. The legal personage stayed a day or two, spending most of his time at the Hall and in driving about to the scattered farms which represented the estate, but he never came to the vicarage, nor did the vicar ever seem to know what he was doing nor why he came. "He came on business" — that was all that anybody knew. His business was to collect rents, of course; but what he did with them, no one was bold enough to surmise. The estate was in Chancery, it was said, and the definition conveyed about as much to the mind of the average inhabitant of Billingsfield, as if he had been informed that the moon was in perigee or the sun in Scorpio. The practical result of its being in Chancery was that no one lived there.

John Short liked Mrs. Ambrose and the Honourable Cornelius behaved to her with well bred affability. She always said Cornelius had very nice manners, as indeed he had and had need to have.

Occasionally, perhaps four or five times in the year, the Reverend Edward Pewlay, who had what he called a tenor voice, and his wife, who played the pianoforte very fairly, came over to assist at a Penny Reading. He lived "over Harlow way," as the natives expressed it; he was what was called in those parts a rabid Anglican, because he preached in his surplice and had services on the Saints' days, and the vicar of Billingsfield did not sympathise in his views. Nevertheless he was very useful at Penny Readings, and on one of these occasions produced a very ingenious ghost for the delectation of the rustics, by means of a piece of plate glass and a couple of lamps.

There had indeed been festivities at the vicarage to which as many as three clergymen's wives had been invited, but these were rare indeed. For months at a time Mrs. Ambrose reigned in undisputed possession of the woman's social rights in Billingsfield. She was an excellent person in every way. She had once been handsome and even now she was fine-looking, of goodly stature, if also of goodly weight; rosy, even rubicund, in complexion, and rotund of feature; looking at you rather severely out of her large grey eyes, but able to smile very cheerfully and to show an uncommonly good set of teeth; twisting her thick grey hair into a small knot at the back of her head and then covering it with a neatly made cap which she considered becoming to her time of life; dressed always with extreme simplicity and neatness, glorying in her good sense and in her stout shoes; speaking of things which she called "neat" with a devotional admiration and ex-

pressing the extremest height of her disapprobation when she said anything was "very untidy." A motherly woman, a practical woman, a good housekeeper and a good wife, careful of small things because generally only small things came in her way, devotedly attached to her husband, whom she regarded with perfect justice as the best man of her acquaintance, adding, however, with somewhat precipitous rashness that he was the best man in the world. She took also a great interest in his pupils and busied herself mightily with their welfare. Since the arrival of the new doctor who was suspected of free-thinking, she had shown a strong leaning towards homœopathy, and prescribed small pellets of belladonna for the Honourable Cornelius's cold and infinitesimal drops of aconite for John Short's headaches, until she observed that John never had a headache unless he had worked too much, and Angleside always had a cold when he did not want to work at all. Especially in the department of the commissariat she showed great activity, and the reputation the vicar had acquired for feeding his pupils well had perhaps more to do with his success than he imagined. She was never tired of repeating that Englishmen needed plenty of good food, and she had no principles which she did not practise. She even thought it right to lecture young Angleside upon his idleness at stated intervals. He always replied with great gentleness that he was awfully stupid, you know, and Mr. Ambrose was awfully good about it and he hoped he should not be pulled when he went up. And strange to relate he actually passed his examination and matriculated, to his own im-

mense astonishment and to the no small honour and glory of the Reverend Augustin Ambrose, vicar of Billingsfield, Essex. But when that great day arrived certain events occurred which are worthy to be chronicled and remembered.

CHAPTER II.

In the warm June weather young Angleside went up to pass his examination for entrance at Trinity. There is nothing particularly interesting or worthy of note in that simple process, though at that time the custom of imposing an examination had only been recently imported from Oxford. For one whole day forty or fifty young fellows from all parts of the country sat at the long dining-tables in the beautiful old hall and wrote as busily as they could, answering the printed questions before them, and eyeing each other curiously from time to time. The weather was warm and sultry, the trees were all in full leaf and Cambridge was deserted. Only a few hard-reading men, who stayed up during the Long, wandered out with books at the backs of the colleges or strayed slowly through the empty courts, objects of considerable interest to the youths who had come up for the entrance examination — chiefly pale men in rather shabby clothes with old gowns and battered caps, and a general appearance of being the worse for wear.

Angleside had been in Cambridge before and consequently lost no time in returning to Billingsfield when the examination was over. Short was to spend the summer at the vicarage, reading hard until the term began, when he was to go up and compete for a minor scholarship; Angleside was to wait until he

heard whether he had passed, and was then going abroad to meet his father and to rest from the extreme exertion of mastering the "Apology" and the first books of the "Memorabilia." John drove over to meet the Honourable Cornelius, who was in a terrible state of anxiety and left him no peace on the way asking him again and again to repeat the answers to the questions which had been proposed, reckoning up the ones he had answered wrong and the ones he thought he might have answered right, and coming each time to a different conclusion, finally lighting a huge brierwood pipe and swearing "that it was a beastly shame to subject human beings to such awful torture." John calmed him by saying he fancied Cornelius had "got through"; for John's words were a species of gospel to Cornelius. By the time they reached the vicarage Angleside felt sanguine of his success.

The vicar was not visible. It was a strange and unheard of thing — there were visitors in the drawing-room. This doubtless accounted for the fact that the fly from the Duke's Head was standing on the opposite side of the road. The two young men went into their study, which was on the ground floor and opened upon the passage which led to the drawing-room from the little hall. Angleside remarked that by leaving the door open they would catch a glimpse of the visitor when he went out. But the visitor stayed long. The curiosity of the two was wrought up to a high pitch; it was many months since there had been a real visitor at the vicarage. Angleside suggested going out and finding old Reynolds — he always knew everything that was going on.

"If we only wait long enough," said Short philosophically, "they are sure to come out."

"Perhaps," returned Cornelius rather doubtfully.

"They" did come out. The drawing-room door opened and there was a sound of voices. It was a woman's voice, and a particularly sweet voice, too. Still no one came down the passage. The lady seemed to be lingering in taking her leave. Then there was a sound of small feet and suddenly a little girl stood before the open door of the study, looking wonderingly at the two young men. Short thought he had never seen such a beautiful child. She could not have been more than seven or eight years old, and was not tall for her age; a delicate little figure, all in black, with long brown curls upon her shoulders, flowing abundantly from beneath a round black sailor's hat that was set far back upon her head. The child's face was rather pale than very fair, of a beautiful transparent paleness, with the least tinge of colour in the cheeks; her great violet eyes gazed wonderingly into the study, and her lips parted in childlike uncertainty, while her little gloved hand rested on the door-post as though to get a sense of security from something so solid.

It was only for a moment. Both the young fellows smiled at the child unconsciously. Perhaps she thought they were laughing at her; she turned and ran away again; then passed a second time, stealing a long glance at the two strangers, but followed immediately by the lady, who was probably her mother, and whose voice had been heard for the last few moments. The lady, too, glanced in as she went by, and John Short lost his heart then and there; not that the lady was beautiful as the little girl was, but because there was something in her face, in her figure, in her whole carriage, that moved

the boy suddenly as she looked at him and sent the blood rushing to his cheeks and forehead.

She seemed young, but he never thought of her age. In reality she was nine-and-twenty years old but looked younger. She was pale, far paler than the little girl, but she had those same violet eyes, large, deep and sorrowful, beneath dark, smooth eyebrows that arched high and rose a little in the middle. Her mouth was perhaps large for her face but her full lips curved gently and seemed able to smile, though she was not smiling. Her nose was perhaps too small — her face was far from faultless — and it had the slightest tendency to turn up instead of down, but it was so delicately modelled that an artist would have pardoned it that deviation from the classic. Thick brown hair waved across her white forehead and was hidden under the black bonnet and the veil thrown back over it. She was dressed in black and the close-fitting gown showed off with unconscious vanity the lines of a perfectly moulded and perfectly supple figure. But it was especially her eyes which attracted John's sudden attention at that first glance, her violet eyes, tender, sad, almost pathetic, seeming to ask sympathy and marvellously able to command it.

It was but for a moment that she paused. Then came the vicar, following her from the drawing-room, and all three went on. Presently Short heard the front door open and Mr. Ambrose shouted to the fly.

"Muggins! Muggins!"

No one had ever been able to say why Abraham Boosey, the publican, had christened his henchman with an appellation so vulgar, to say the least of it

—so amazingly cacophonous. The man's real name was plain Charles Bird; but Abraham Boosey had christened him Muggins and Muggins he remained. Muggins had had some beer and was asleep, for the afternoon was hot and he had anticipated his "fours."

Short saw his opportunity and darted out of the study to the hall where the lady and her little girl were waiting while the vicar tried to rouse the driver of the fly by shouting at him. John blushed again as he passed close to the woman with the sad eyes; he could not tell why, but the blood mounted to the very roots of his hair, and for a moment he felt very foolish.

"I'll wake him up, Mr. Ambrose," he said, running out hatless into the summer's sun.

"Wake up, you lazy beggar!" he shouted in the ear of the sleeping Muggins, shaking him violently by the arm as he stood upon the wheel. Muggins grunted something and smiled rather idiotically. "It was only the young gentleman's play," he would have said. Bless you! he did not mind being shaken and screamed at! He slowly turned his horses and brought the fly up to the door. John walked back and stood waiting.

"Thank you," said the lady in a voice that made his heart jump, as she came out from under the porch and the vicar helped her to get in. Then it was the turn of the little girl.

"Good-bye, my dear," said the vicar kindly as he took her hand.

"Good-bye," said the child. Then she hesitated and looked at John, who was standing beside the clergyman. "Good-bye," she repeated, holding out her little hand shyly towards him. John took it

and grew redder than ever as he felt that the lady was watching him. Then the little girl blushed and laughed in her small embarrassment, and climbed into the carriage.

"You will write, then?" asked Mr. Ambrose as he shut the door.

"Yes — and thank you again. You are very, very kind to me," answered the lady, and John thought that as she spoke there were tears in her voice. She seemed very unhappy and to John she seemed very beautiful. Muggins cracked his whip and the fly moved off, leaving the vicar and his pupil standing together at the iron wicket gate before the house.

"Well? Do you think Angleside got through?" asked Mr. Ambrose, rather anxiously.

Short said he thought Angleside was safe. He hoped the vicar would say something about the lady, but to his annoyance, he said nothing at all. John could not ask questions, seeing it was none of his business and was fain to content himself with thinking of the lady's face and voice. He felt very uncomfortable at dinner. He thought the excellent Mrs. Ambrose eyed him with unusual severity, as though suspecting what he was thinking about, and he thought the vicar's grey eye twinkled occasionally with the pleasant sense of possessing a secret he had no intention of imparting. As a matter of fact Mrs. Ambrose was supremely unconscious of the fact that John had seen the lady, and looked at him with some curiosity, observing that he seemed nervous and blushed from time to time and was more silent than usual. She came to the conclusion that he had been working too hard, as usual, and that night requested him to take two little pellets of aconite,

and to repeat the dose in the morning. Whether it was the result of the homœopathic medicine or of the lapse of a few hours and a good night's rest, it is impossible to say; John, however, was himself again the next morning and showed no further signs of nervousness. But he kept his eyes and ears open, hoping for some news of the exquisite creature who had made so profound an impression on his heart.

In due time the joyful news arrived from Cambridge that the Honourable Cornelius had passed his examination and was at liberty to matriculate at the beginning of the term. The intelligence was duly telegraphed to his father, and in a few hours came a despatch in answer, full of affectionate congratulation and requesting that Cornelius should proceed at once to Paris, where his father was waiting for him. The young man took an affectionate leave of the vicar, of Mrs. Ambrose and especially of John Short, for whom he had conceived an almost superstitious admiration; old Reynolds was not forgotten in the farewell, and for several days after Angleside's departure the aged gardener was observed to walk somewhat unsteadily and to wear a peculiarly thoughtful expression; while the vicar observed with annoyance that Strawberry, the old mare, was less carefully groomed than usual. Strangely coincident with these phenomena was the fact that Simon Gunn's yellow cat seemed to have entirely repented of her evil practices, renouncing from the day when Cornelius left for Paris her periodical invasion of the asparagus beds at the foot of the garden. But the vicar was too practical a man to waste time in speculating upon the occult relations of seemingly disconnected facts. He applied himself with diligence to

the work of preparing John Short to compete for the minor scholarship. The labour was congenial. He had never taken a pupil so far before, and it was a genuine delight to him to bring his own real powers into play at last. As the summer wore on, he predicted all manner of success for John Short, and his predictions were destined before long to be realised, for John did all he promised to do and more also. To have succeeded in pushing the Honourable Cornelius through his entrance examination was a triumph indeed, but an uninteresting one at best, and one which had no further consequences. But to be the means of turning out the senior classic of the University was an honour which would not only greatly increase the good vicar's reputation but would be to him a source of the keenest satisfaction during the remainder of his life; moreover the prospects which would be immediately opened to John in case he obtained such a brilliant success would be a very material benefit to his unlucky father, whose talents yielded him but a precarious livelihood and whose pitiable condition had induced his old schoolfellow to undertake the education of his son.

Much depended upon John's obtaining one or more scholarships during his career at college. To a man of inferior talents the vicar would have suggested that it would be wiser to go to a smaller college than Trinity where he would have less competition to expect; but as soon as he realised John's powers, he made up his mind that it would be precisely where competition was hottest that his pupil would have the greatest success. He would get something — perhaps his father would make a little more money — the vicar even dreamed of lending

John a small sum — something would turn up; at all events he must go to the largest college and do everything in the best possible way. Meanwhile he must work as hard as he could during the few months remaining before the beginning of his first term.

Whether the lady ever wrote to Mr. Ambrose, John could not ascertain; she was never mentioned at the vicarage, and it seemed as though the mystery were never to be solved. But the impression she had made upon the young man's mind remained and even gained strength by the working of his imagination; for he thought of her night and day, treasuring up every memory of her that he could recall, building romances in his mind, conceiving the most ingenious reasons for the solitary visit she had made to the vicarage, and inwardly vowing that if ever he should be at liberty to follow his own inclinations he would go out into the world and search for her. He was only eighteen then, and of a strongly susceptible temperament. He had seen nothing of the world, for even when living in London, in a dingy lodging, with his father, he had been perpetually occupied with books, reading much and seeing little. Then he had been at school, but he had seen the dark side of school life — the side which boys who are known to be very poor generally see; and more than ever he had resorted to study for comfort and relief from outward ills. Then at last he had been transferred to a serener state in the vicarage of Billingsfield and had grown up rapidly from a schoolboy to a young man; but, as has been said, the feminine element at the vicarage was solely represented by Mrs. Ambrose and the monotony of her maternal society was varied only by the occasional visits of the mild young Mrs. Edward

Pewlay. John Short had indeed a powerful and aspiring imagination, but it would have been impossible even by straining that faculty to its utmost activity to think in the same breath of romance and of Mrs. Ambrose, for even in her youth Mrs. Ambrose had not been precisely a romantic character. John's fancy was not stimulated by his surroundings, but it fed upon itself and grew fast enough to acquire an influence over everything he did. It was not surprising that, when at last chance threw in his way a being who seemed instantly to realise and fulfil his wildest dreams of beauty and feminine fascination, he should have yielded without a struggle to the delicious influence, feeling that henceforth his ideal had taken shape and substance, and had thereby become more than ever the ideal in which he delighted.

He gave her names, a dozen of them every day, christening her after every heroine in fiction and history of whom he had ever read. But no name seemed to suit her well enough; whereupon he wrote a Greek ode and a Latin epistle to the fair unknown, but omitted to show them to the Reverend Augustin Ambrose, though he was quite certain that they were the best he had ever produced. Then he began to write a novel, but suddenly recollected that a famous author had written one entitled "No Name," and as that was the only title he could possibly give to the work he contemplated he of course had no choice but to abandon the work itself. He wrote more verses, and he dreamed more dreams, and he meanwhile acquired much learning and in process of time realised that he had but a few days longer to stay at Billingsfield. The Michaelmas term was about to open and

he must bid farewell to the hospitable roof and the learned conversation of the good vicar. But when those last days came he realised that he was leaving the scene of his only dream, and his heart grew sad.

Indeed he loved the old red brick vicarage with its low porch, overgrown with creepers, its fragrant old flower garden, surrounding it on three sides, its gabled roof, its south wall whereon the vicar constantly attempted to train fig trees, maintaining that the climate of England had grown warmer and that he would prove it — John loved it all, and especially he loved the little study, lined with the books grown familiar to him, and the study door, the door through which he had seen that lovely face which he firmly believed was to inspire him to do great things and to influence his whole life for ever after. He would leave the door open and place himself just where he had sat that day, and then he would look suddenly up with beating heart, almost fancying he could again see those violet eyes gazing at him from the dusky passage — blushing then to himself, like any girl, and burying himself in his book till the fancy was grown too strong and he looked up again. He had attempted to sketch her face on a bit of paper; but he had no skill and he thrust the drawing into the paper basket, horrified at having made anything so hideous in the effort to represent anything so beautiful, and returned to making odes upon her, and Latin epistles, in which he succeeded much better.

And now the time had come when he must leave all this dreaming, or at least the scene of it, and go to college and win scholarships and renown. It was hard to go and he showed his regret so plainly that

Mrs. Ambrose was touched at what she took for his affection for the place and for herself and for the vicar. John Short was indeed very grateful to her for all the kindness she had shown him, and to Mr. Ambrose for the learning he had acquired; for John was a fine fellow and never forgot an obligation nor undervalued one. But when we are very young our hearts are far more easily touched to joy and sadness by the chords and discords of our own dreaming, than by the material doings of the world around us, or by the strong and benevolent interest our elders are good enough to take in us. We feel grateful to those same elders if we have any good in us, but we are far from feeling a similar interest in them. We see in our imaginations wonderful pictures, and we hear wonderful words, for everything we dream of partakes of an unknown perfection and completely throws into the shade the inartistic commonplaces of daily life. As John Short grew older, he often regretted the society of his old tutor and in the frequent absence of important buttons from his raiment he bitterly realised that there was no longer a motherly Mrs. Ambrose to inspect his linen; but when he took leave of them what hurt him most was to turn his back upon the beloved old study, upon the very door through which he had once, and only once, beheld the ideal of his first love dream.

Though the vicar was glad to see the boy started upon what he already regarded as a career of certain victory, he was sorry to lose him, not knowing when he should see him again. John intended to read through all the vacations until he got his degree. He might indeed have come down for a day or two at Christmas, but with his very slender resources even

so short a pleasure trip was not to be thought of lightly. It was therefore to be a long separation, so long to look forward to that when John saw the shabby little box which contained all his worldly goods put up into the back of the vicar's dogcart, and stood at last in the hall, saying good-bye, he felt as though he was being thrust out into the world never to return again; his heart seemed to rise in his throat, the tears stood in his eyes and he could hardly speak a word. Even then he thought of that day when he had waked up the sleepy Muggins to take away the beautiful unknown lady. He felt he must be quick about his leave-taking, or he would break down.

"You have been very good to me. I — I shall never forget it," he murmured as he shook hands with Mrs. Ambrose. "And you, too, sir — " he added turning to the vicar. But the old clergyman cut him short, being himself rather uncertain about the throat.

"Good-bye, my lad. God bless you. We shall hear of you soon — showing them what you can do with your Alcaics — Good-bye."

So John got into the dogcart and was driven off by the ancient Reynolds — past the "Duke's Head," past the "Feathers," past the churchyard and the croft — the "croat," they called it in Billingsfield — and on by the windmill on the heath, a hideous bit of grassless common euphemistically so named, and so out to the high-road towards the railway station, feeling very miserable indeed. It is a curious fact, too, in the history of his psychology that in proportion as he got farther from the vicarage he thought more and more of his old tutor and less and

less of his unfinished dream, and he realised painfully that the vicar was nearly the only friend he had in the world. He would of course find Cornelius Angleside at Cambridge, but he suspected that Cornelius, turned loose among a merry band of undergraduates of his own position would be a very different person from the idle youth he had known at Billingsfield, trembling in the intervals of his idleness at the awful prospect of the entrance examination, and frantically attempting to master some bit of stray knowledge which might possibly be useful to him. Cornelius would hunt, would gamble, would go to the races and would give wines at college; John was to be a reading man who must avoid such things as he would avoid the devil himself, not only because he was too wretchedly poor to have any share whatever in the amusements of Cornelius and his set, but because every minute was important, every hour meant not only learning but meant, most emphatically, money. He thought of his poor father, grinding out the life of a literary hack in a wretched London lodging, dining Heaven knew where and generally supping not at all, saving every penny to help his son's education, hard working, honest, lacking no virtue except the virtue of all virtues — success. Then he thought how he himself had been favoured by fortune during these last years, living under the vicar's roof, treated with the same consideration as the high-born young gentlemen who had been his companions, living well, sleeping well and getting the best education in England for nothing or next to nothing, while that same father of his had never ceased to slave day and night with his pen, honestly doing his best and yet enjoying none of the good

things of life. John thought of all this and set his teeth boldly to face the world. A few months, he thought, and he might have earned a scholarship — he might be independent. Then a little longer — less than three years — and he might, nay, he would, take high honours in the university and come back crowned with glory, with the prospect of a fellowship, with every profession open to him, with the world at his feet and with money in his hand to help his father out of all his troubles.

That was how John Short went to Trinity. It was a hard struggle at first, for he found himself much poorer than he had imagined, and it seemed as though the ends could not possibly meet. There was no question of denying himself luxuries; that would have been easy enough. In those first months it was the necessities that he lacked, the coals for his little grate, the oil for his one small lamp. But he fought bravely through it, having, like many another young fellow who has weathered the storms of poverty in pursuit of learning, an iron constitution, and an even stronger will. He used to say long afterwards that feeling cold was a mere habit and that when one thoroughly understood the construction of Greek verses, some stimulus of physical discomfort was necessary to make the imagination work well; in support of which assertion he said that he had never done such good things by the comfortable fire in the study at Billingsfield vicarage as he did afterwards on winter nights by the light of a tallow candle, high up in Neville's Court. Moreover, if any one argued that it was better for an extremely poor man not to go to Trinity, but to some much smaller college, he answered that as far as he himself was concerned he

could not have done better, which was quite true and therefore perfectly unanswerable. Where the competition was less, he would have been satisfied with less, he said; where it was greatest a man could only be contented when he had reached the highest point possible. But before he attained his end he suffered more than any one knew, especially during those first months. For when he had got his first scholarship, he insisted upon sending back the little sums of hard-earned money his father sent him from time to time, and he consequently had nearly as hard work as before to keep himself warm and to keep oil in his lamp during the long winter's evenings. But he succeeded, nevertheless.

CHAPTER III.

In the month of October of that year, a short time after John had taken up his abode in Trinity College, an event occurred which shook Billingsfield to its foundations; no less an event than the occupation of the dwelling known as the "cottage." What the cottage was will appear hereafter. The arrival of the new tenants occurred in the following manner.

The Reverend Augustin Ambrose received a letter, which he immediately showed to his wife, as he showed most of his correspondence; for he was of the disposition which may be termed wife-consulting. Married men are generally of two kinds; those who tell their wives everything and those who tell them nothing. It is evident that the relative merits of the two systems depend chiefly upon the relative merits of the wives in question. Mr. Ambrose had no doubt of the advantages of his own method and he carried it to its furthest expression, for he never did anything whatever without consulting his better half. On the whole the plan worked well, for the vicar had learning and his wife had common sense. He therefore showed the letter to her and she read it, and read it again, and finally put it away, writing across the envelope in her own large, clear hand the words — Goddard, Cottage — indicative of the contents.

"My Dear Sir — It is now nearly five months since I saw you last. Need I tell you that the sense of your kindness is still fresh in my memory? You do not know, indeed you cannot know, what an impression your goodness made upon me. You showed me that I was acting rightly. It has been so hard to act rightly. Of course you quite understand what I mean. I cannot refer to the great sorrow which has overtaken me and my dear innocent little Nellie. There is no use in referring to it, for I have told you all. You allowed me to unburden my heart to you during my brief visit, and ever since that day I have felt very much, I may say infinitely, relieved.

"I am again about to ask you a favour; I trust indeed that I am not asking too much, but I know by experience how kind you are and so I am not afraid to ask this too. Do you remember speaking to me of the little cottage? The picture you drew of it quite charmed me, and I have determined to take it, that is, if it is still to be let and if it is not asking quite too much of you. I mean, if you will take it for me. You cannot think how grateful I shall be and I enclose a cheque. I am almost sure you said thirty-six pounds. It was thirty-six, was it not? The reason I venture to enclose the money is because you are so very kind, but of course you do not know anything certain about me. But I am sure you will understand. You said you were sure I could live with my little girl in Billingsfield for three hundred a year. I find I have a little more, in fact nearly five hundred. If you tell me that I can have the cottage, I will come down at once, for town is very dreary and we have been here all summer

except a week at Margate. Let me thank you again, you have been so very kind, and believe me, my dear sir, very sincerely yours,

"MARY GODDARD."

"Augustin, my dear, this is very exciting," said Mrs. Ambrose, as she handed the cheque to her husband for inspection and returned the letter to its envelope, preparatory to marking it for future reference; and when, as has been said, she had written upon the outside the words — Goddard, Cottage, and had put it away she turned upon her husband with an inquiring manner peculiar to her. Mr. Ambrose was standing before the window, looking out at the rain and occasionally glancing at the cheque he still held in his hand.

"Just like a woman to send a cheque to 'bearer' through the post," he remarked, severely. "However since I have got it, it is all right."

"I don't think it is all right, Augustin," said his wife. "We are taking a great responsibility in bringing her into the parish. I am quite sure she is a dissenter or a Romanist or something dreadful, to begin with."

"My dear," answered the vicar, mildly, "you make very uncharitable suppositions. It seems to me that the most one can say of her is that she is very unhappy and that she does not write very good English."

"Oh, I have no doubt she is very unhappy. But as you say we must not be uncharitable. I suppose you will have to write about the cottage."

"I suppose so," said Mr. Ambrose doubtfully. "I cannot send her back the money, and the cottage is certainly to let."

He deposited the cheque in the drawer of his writing-table and began to walk up and down the room, glancing up from time to time at his wife who was lifting one after another the ornaments which stood upon the chimney-piece, in order to ascertain whether Susan had dusted underneath them. She had many ways of assuring herself that people did their work properly.

"No," said she, "you cannot send her back the money. But it is a very solemn responsibility. I hope we are doing quite right."

"I certainly would not hesitate to return the cheque, my dear, if I thought any harm would come of Mrs. Goddard's living here. But I don't think there is any reason to doubt her story."

"Of course not. It was in the *Standard*, so there is no doubt about it. I only hope no one else reads the papers here."

"They read them in the kitchen," added Mrs. Ambrose presently, "and they probably take a paper at the Duke's Head. Mr. Boosey is rather a literary character."

"Nobody will suppose it was that Goddard, my dear," said the vicar in a reassuring tone of voice.

"No — you had better write about the cottage."

"I will," said the vicar; and he forthwith did. And moreover, with his usual willingness to give himself trouble for other people, he took a vast deal of pains to see that the cottage was really habitable. It turned out to be in very good condition. It was a pretty place enough, standing ten yards back from the road, beyond the village, just opposite the gates of the park; a little square house of red brick with a high pointed roof and a little garden. The walls

were overgrown with creepers which had once been trained with considerable care, but which during the last two years had thriven in untrimmed luxuriance and now covered the whole of the side of the house which faced the road. So thickly did they grow that it was with difficulty that the windows could at first be opened. The vicar sighed as he entered the darkened rooms. His daughter had lived in the cottage when she first married the young doctor who had now gone to London, and the vicar had been, and was, very fond of his daughter. He had almost despaired of ever seeing her again in Billingsfield; the only glimpses of her he could obtain were got by going himself to town, for the doctor was so busy that he always put off the projected visit to the country and his wife was so fond of him that she refused to go alone. The vicar sighed as he forced open the windows upon the lower floor and let the light into the bare and empty rooms which had once been so bright and full of happiness. He wondered what sort of person Mrs. Goddard would turn out to be upon nearer acquaintance, and made vague, unconscious conjectures about her furniture as he stumbled up the dark stairs to the upper story.

He was not left long in doubt. The arrangements were easily concluded, for the cottage belonged to the estate in Chancery and the lawyer in charge was very busy with other matters. The guarantee afforded by the vicar's personal application, together with the payment of a year's rent in advance so far facilitated matters that four days after she had written to Mr. Ambrose the latter informed Mrs. Goddard that she was at liberty to take possession. The vicar suggested that the Billingsfield carrier, who

drove his cart to London once a week, could bring her furniture down in two trips and save her a considerable expense; Mrs. Goddard accepted this advice and in the course of a fortnight was installed with all her goods in the cottage. Having completed her arrangements at last, she came to call upon the vicar's wife.

Mrs. Goddard had not changed since she had first visited Billingsfield, five months earlier, though little Eleanor had grown taller and was if possible prettier than ever. Something of the character of the lady in black may have been gathered from the style of her letter to Mr. Ambrose; that communication had impressed the vicar's wife unfavourably and had drawn from her husband a somewhat compassionate remark about the bad English it contained. Nevertheless when Mrs. Goddard came to live in Billingsfield the Ambroses soon discovered that she was a very well-educated woman, that she appeared to have read much and to have read intelligently, and that she was on the whole decidedly interesting. It was long, however, before Mrs. Ambrose entirely conquered a certain antipathy she felt for her, and which she explained after her own fashion. Mrs. Goddard was not a dissenter and she was not a Romanist; on the contrary she appeared to be a very good churchwoman. She paid her bills regularly and never gave anybody any trouble. She visited the vicarage at stated intervals, and the vicarage graciously returned her visits. The vicar himself even went to the cottage more often than Mrs. Ambrose thought strictly necessary, for the vicar was strongly prejudiced in her favour. But Mrs. Ambrose did not share that prejudice. Mrs. Goddard,

she said, was too effusive, talked too much about herself and her troubles, did not look thoroughly straightforward, probably had foreign blood. Ay, there was the rub — Mrs. Ambrose suspected that Mrs. Goddard was not quite English. If she was not, why did she not say so, and be done with it?

Mrs. Goddard was English, nevertheless, and would have been very much surprised could she have guessed the secret cause of the slight coldness she sometimes observed in the manner of the clergyman's wife towards her. She herself, poor thing, believed it was because she was in trouble, and considering the nature of the disaster which had befallen her, she was not surprised. She was rather a weak woman, rather timid, and if she talked a little too much sometimes it was because she felt embarrassed; there were times, too, when she was very silent and sad. She had been very happy and the great catastrophe had overtaken her suddenly, leaving her absolutely without friends. She wanted to be hidden from the world, and by one of those strange contrasts often found in weak people she had suddenly made a very bold resolution and had successfully carried it out. She had come straight to a man she had never seen, but whom she knew very well by reputation, and had told him her story and asked him to help her; and she had not come in vain. The person who advised her to go to the Reverend Augustin Ambrose knew that there was not a better man to whom she could apply. She had found what she wanted, a sort of deserted village where she would never be obliged to meet any one, since there was absolutely no society; she had found a good man upon whom she felt she could rely in case of further

difficulty; and she had not come upon false pretences, for she had told her whole story quite frankly. For a woman who was naturally timid she had done a thing requiring considerable courage, and she was astonished at her own boldness after she had done it. But in her peaceful retreat, she reflected that she could not possibly have left England, as many women in her position would have done, simply because the idea of exile was intolerable to her; she reflected also that if she had settled in any place where there was any sort of society her story would one day have become known, and that if she had spent years in studying her situation she could not have done better than in going boldly to the vicar of Billingsfield and explaining her sad position to him. She had found a haven of rest after many months of terrible anxiety and she hoped that she might end her days in peace and in the spot she had chosen. But she was very young — not thirty years of age yet — and her little girl would soon grow up — and then? Evidently her dream of peace was likely to be of limited duration; but she resigned herself to the unpleasant possibilities of the future with a good grace, in consideration of the advantages she enjoyed in the present.

Mrs. Ambrose was at home when Mrs. Goddard and little Eleanor came to the vicarage. Indeed Mrs. Ambrose was rarely out in the afternoon, unless something very unusual called her away. She received her visitor with the stern hospitality she exercised towards strangers. The strangers she saw were generally the near relations of the young gentlemen whom her husband received for educational purposes. She stood in the front drawing-room,

that is to say, in the most impressive chamber of that fortress which is an Englishman's house. It was a formal room, arranged by a fixed rule and the order of it was maintained inflexibly; no event could be imagined of such terrible power as to have caused the displacement of one of those chairs, of one of those ornaments upon the chimney-piece, of one of those engravings upon the walls. The walls were papered with one shade of green, the furniture was covered with material of another shade of green and the well-spared carpet exhibited still a third variety of the same colour. Mrs. Ambrose's sense of order did not extend to the simplest forms of artistic harmony, but when it had an opportunity of impressing itself upon inanimate objects which were liable to be moved, washed or dusted, its effects were formidable indeed. She worshipped neatness and cleanliness; she left the question of taste to others. And now she stood in the keep of her stronghold, the impersonation of moral rectitude and of practical housekeeping.

Mrs. Goddard entered rather timidly, followed by little Eleanor whose ideas had been so much disturbed by the recent change in her existence, that she had grown unusually silent and her great violet eyes were unceasingly opened wide to take in the growing wonders of her situation. Mrs. Goddard was still dressed in black, as when John Short had seen her five months earlier. There was something a little peculiar in her mourning, though Mrs. Ambrose would have found it hard to define the peculiarity. Some people would have said that if she was really a widow her gown fitted a little too well, her bonnet was a little too small, her veil a little too short.

Mrs. Ambrose supposed that those points were suggested by the latest fashions in London and summed up the difficulty by surmising that Mrs. Goddard had foreign blood.

"I should have called before," said the latter, deeply impressed by the severe appearance of the vicar's wife, "but I have been so busy putting my things into the cottage — "

"Pray don't think of it," answered Mrs. Ambrose. Then she added after a pause, "I am very glad to see you." She appeared to have been weighing in her conscience the question whether she could truthfully say so or not. But Mrs. Goddard was grateful for the smallest advances.

"Thank you," she said, "you are so very kind. Will you tell Mr. Ambrose how thankful I am for his kind assistance? Yes, Nellie and I have had hard work in moving, have not we, dear?" She drew the beautiful child close to her and gazed lovingly into her eyes. But Nellie was shy; she hid her face on her mother's shoulder, and then looked doubtfully at Mrs. Ambrose, and then hid herself again.

"How old is your little girl?" asked Mrs. Ambrose more kindly. She was fond of children, and actually pitied any child whose mother perhaps had foreign blood.

"Eleanor — I call her Nellie — is eight years old. She will be nine in January. She is tall for her age," added Mrs. Goddard with affectionate pride. As a matter of fact Nellie was small for her years, and Mrs. Ambrose, who was the most truthful of women, felt that she could not conscientiously agree in calling her tall. She changed the subject.

"I am afraid you will find it very quiet in Billingsfield," she said presently.

"Oh, I am used — that is, I prefer a very quiet place. I want to live very quietly for some years, indeed I hope for the rest of my life. Besides it will be so good for Nellie to live in the country — she will grow so strong."

"She looks very well, I am sure," answered Mrs. Ambrose rather bluntly, looking at the child's clear complexion and bright eyes. "And have you always lived in town until now, Mrs. Goddard?" she asked.

"Oh no, not always, but most of the year, perhaps. Indeed I think so." Mrs. Goddard felt nervous before the searching glance of the elder woman. Mrs. Ambrose concluded that she was not absolutely straightforward.

"Do you think you can make the cottage comfortable?" asked the vicar's wife, seeing that the conversation languished.

"Oh, I think so," answered her visitor, glad to change the subject, and suddenly becoming very voluble as she had previously been very shy. "It is really a charming little place. Of course it is not very large, but as we have not got very many belongings that is all the better; and the garden is small but extremely pretty and wild, and the kitchen is very convenient; really I quite wonder how the people who built it could have made it all so comfortable. You see there are one — two — the pantry, the kitchen and two rooms on the ground floor and plenty of room upstairs for everybody, and as for the sun! it streams into all the windows at once from morning till night. And such a pretty view, too,

of that old gate opposite — where does it lead to, Mrs. Ambrose? It is so very pretty."

"It leads to the park and the Hall," answered Mrs. Ambrose.

"Oh —" Mrs. Goddard's tone changed. "But nobody lives there?" she asked suddenly.

"Oh no — it is in Chancery, you know."

"What — what is that, exactly?" asked Mrs. Goddard, timidly. "Is there a young heir waiting to grow up — I mean waiting to take possession?"

"No. There is a suit about it. It has been going on for forty years my husband says, and they cannot decide to whom it belongs."

"I see," answered Mrs. Goddard. "I suppose they will never decide now."

"Probably not for some time."

"It must be a very pretty place. Can one go in, do you think? I am so fond of trees — what a beautiful garden you have yourself, Mrs. Ambrose."

"Would you like to see it?" asked the vicar's wife, anxious to bring the visit to a conclusion.

"Oh, thank you — of all things!" exclaimed Mrs. Goddard. "Would not you like to run about the garden, Nellie?"

The little girl nodded slowly and stared at Mrs. Ambrose.

"My husband is a very good gardener," said the latter, leading the way out to the hall. "And so was John Short, but he has left us, you know."

"Who was John Short?" asked Mrs. Goddard rather absently, as she watched Mrs. Ambrose who was wrapping herself in a huge blue waterproof cloak and tying a sort of worsted hood over her head.

"He was one of the boys Mr. Ambrose prepared

for college — such a good fellow. You may have seen him when you came last June, Mrs. Goddard?"

"Had he very bright blue eyes — a nice face?"

"Yes — that is, it might have been Mr. Angleside — Lord Scatterbeigh's son — he was here, too."

"Oh," said Mrs. Goddard, "perhaps it was."

"Mamma," asked little Nellie, "what is Laws Catterbay?"

"A peer, darling."

"Like the one at Brighton, mamma, with a band?"

"No, child," answered the mother laughing. "P, double E, R, peer — a rich gentleman."

"Like poor papa then?" inquired the irrepressible Eleanor.

Mrs. Goddard turned pale and pressed the little girl close to her side, leaning down to whisper in her ear.

"You must not ask foolish questions, darling — I will tell you by and by."

"Papa was a rich gentleman," objected the child.

Mrs. Goddard looked at Mrs. Ambrose, and the ready tears came into her eyes. The vicar's wife smiled kindly and took little Nellie by the hand.

"Come, dear," she said in the motherly tone that was natural to her when she was not receiving visitors. "Come and see the garden and you can play with Carlo."

"Can't I see Laws Catterbay, too?" asked the little girl rather wistfully.

"Carlo is a great, big, brown dog," said Mrs. Ambrose, leading the child out into the garden, while Mrs. Goddard followed close behind. Before they had gone far they came upon the vicar, arrayed in an old coat, his hands thrust into a pair of gigantic gardening gloves and a battered old felt hat upon

his head. Mrs. Goddard had felt rather uncomfortable in the impressive society of Mrs. Ambrose and the sight of the vicar's genial face was reassuring in the extreme. She was not disappointed, for he immediately relieved the situation by asking all manner of kindly questions, interspersed with remarks upon his garden, while Mrs. Ambrose introduced little Nellie to the acquaintance of Carlo who had not seen so pretty a little girl for many a day, and capered and wagged his feathery tail in a manner most unseemly for so clerical a dog.

So it came about that Mrs. Goddard established herself at Billingsfield and made her first visit to the vicarage. After that the ice was broken and things went on smoothly enough. Mrs. Ambrose's hints concerning foreign blood, and her husband's invariable remonstrance to the effect that she ought to be more charitable, grew more and more rare as time went on, and finally ceased altogether. Mrs. Goddard became a regular institution, and ceased to astonish the inhabitants. Mr. Thomas Reid, the sexton, was heard to remark from time to time that he "didn't hold with th'm newfangle fashins in dress;" but he was a regular old conservative, and most people agreed with Mr. Abraham Boosey of the Duke's Head, who had often been to London, and who said she did "look just A one, slap up, she did!"

Mrs. Goddard became an institution, and in the course of the first year of her residence in the cottage it came to be expected that she should dine at the vicarage at least once a week; and once a week, also, Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose went up and had tea with her and little Eleanor at the cottage. It came to pass also that Mrs. Goddard heard a vast deal of talk about John Short and his successes at Trinity, and

she actually developed a lively interest in his career, and asked for news of him almost as eagerly as though he had been already a friend of her own. In very quiet places people easily get into the sympathetic habit of regarding their neighbours' interests as very closely allied to their own. The constant talk about John Short, the vicar's sanguine hopes for his brilliant future, and Mrs. Ambrose's unlimited praise of his moral qualities, repeated day by day and week by week produced a vivid impression on Mrs. Goddard's mind. It would have surprised her and even amused her beyond measure had she had any idea that she herself had for a long time absorbed the interest of this same John Short, that he had written hundreds of Greek and Latin verses in her praise, while wholly ignorant of her name, and that at the very time when without knowing him, she was constantly mentioning him as though she knew him intimately well, he himself was looking back to the one glimpse he had had of her, as to a dream of unspeakable bliss.

It never occurred to Mr. Ambrose's mind to tell John in the occasional letters he wrote that Mrs. Goddard had settled in Billingsfield. John, he thought, could take no possible interest in knowing about her, and moreover, Mrs. Goddard herself was most anxious never to be mentioned abroad. She had come to Billingsfield to live in complete obscurity, and the good vicar had promised that as far as he and his wife were concerned she should have her wish. To tell even John Short, his own beloved pupil, would be to some extent a breach of faith, and there was assuredly no earthly reason why John should be told. It might do harm, for of course the young fellow had made acquaintances at Cambridge;

he had probably read about the Goddard case in the papers, and might talk about it. If he should happen to come down for a day or two he would probably meet her; but that could not be avoided. It was not likely that he would come for some time. The vicar himself intended to go up to Cambridge for a day or two after Christmas to see him; but the winter flew by and Mr. Ambrose did not go. Then came Easter, then the summer and the Long vacation. John wrote that he could not leave his books for a day, but that he hoped to run down next Christmas. Again he did not come, but there came the news of his having won another and a more important scholarship; the news also that he was already regarded as the most promising man in the university, all of which exceedingly delighted the heart of the Reverend Augustin Ambrose, and being told with eulogistic comments to Mrs. Goddard, tended to increase the interest she felt in the existence of John Short, so that she began to long for a sight of him, without exactly knowing why.

Gradually, too, as she and her little girl passed many peaceful days in the quiet cottage, the sad woman's face grew less sorrowful. She spoke of herself more cheerfully and dwelt less upon the subject of her grief. She had at first been so miserable that she could hardly talk at all without referring to her unhappy situation though, after her first interview with Mrs. Ambrose, no one had ever heard her mention any details connected with her trouble. But now she never approached the subject at all. Her face lost none of its pathetic beauty, it is true, but it seemed to express sorrow past rather than present. Meanwhile little Nellie grew daily more lovely, and absorbed more and more of her mother's attention.

CHAPTER IV.

EVENTS of such stirring interest as the establishment of Mrs. Goddard in Billingsfield rarely come alone; for it seems to be in the nature of great changes to bring other changes with them, even when there is no apparent connection whatever between them. It took nearly two years for Billingsfield to recover from its astonishment at Mrs. Goddard's arrival, and before the excitement had completely worn off the village was again taken off its feet by unexpected news of stupendous import, even as of old Pompeii was overthrown by a second earthquake before it had wholly recovered from the devastation caused by the first. The shock was indeed a severe one. The Juxon estate was reported to be out of Chancery, and a new squire was coming to take up his residence at the Hall.

It is not known exactly how the thing first became known, but there was soon no doubt whatever that it was true. Thomas Reid, the sexton, who remembered that the old squire died forty years ago come Michaelmas, and had been buried in a "wonderful heavy" coffin, Thomas Reid the stern censor of the vicar's sermons, a melancholic and sober man, so far lost his head over the news as to ask Mr. Ambrose's leave to ring the bells, Mr. Abraham Boosey having promised beer for the ringers. Even to the vicar's enlightened mind it seemed fitting that there should

be some festivity over so great an event and the bells were accordingly rung during one whole afternoon. Thomas Reid's ringers never got beyond the first "bob" of a peal, for with the exception of the sexton himself and old William Speller the wheelwright, who pulled the treble bell, they were chiefly dull youths who with infinite difficulty had been taught what changes they knew by rote and had very little idea of ringing by scientific rule. Moreover Mr. Boosey was liberal in the matter of beer that day and the effect of each successive can that was taken up the stairs of the old tower was immediately apparent to every one within hearing, that is to say as far as five miles around.

The estate was out of Chancery at last. For forty years, ever since the death of the old squire, no one had rightfully called the Hall his own. The heir had lived abroad, and had lived in such an exceedingly eccentric manner as to give ground for a suit *de lunatico inquirendo*, brought by another heir. With the consistency of judicial purpose which characterises such proceedings the courts appeared to have decided that though the natural possessor, the eccentric individual who lived abroad, was too mad to be left in actual possession, he was not mad enough to justify actual possession in the person of the next of kin. Proceedings continued, fees were paid, a certain legal personage already mentioned came down from time to time and looked over the estate, but the matter was not finally settled until the eccentric individual died, after forty years of eccentricity, to the infinite relief and satisfaction of all parties and especially of his lawful successor Charles James Juxon now, at last, "of Billingsfield Hall, in the county of Essex, Esquire."

In due time also Mr. Juxon appeared. It was natural that he should come to see the vicar, and as it happened that he called late in the afternoon upon the day when Mrs. Goddard and little Eleanor were accustomed to dine at the vicarage, he at once had an opportunity of making the acquaintance of his tenant; thus, if we except the free-thinking doctor, it will be seen that Mr. Juxon was in the course of five minutes introduced to the whole of the Billingsfield society.

He was a man inclining towards middle age, of an active and vigorous body, of a moderate intelligence and of decidedly prepossessing appearance. His features were of the strong, square type, common to men whose fathers for many generations have lived in the country. His eyes were small, blue and very bright, and to judge from the lines in his sunburned face he was a man who laughed often and heartily. He had an abundance of short brown hair, parted very far upon one side and brushed to a phenomenal smoothness, and he wore a full brown beard, cut rather short and carefully trimmed. He immediately won the heart of Mrs. Ambrose on account of his extremely neat appearance. There was no foreign blood in him, she was sure. He had large clean hands with large and polished nails. He wore very well made clothes, and he spoke like a gentleman. The vicar, too, was at once prepossessed in his favour, and even little Eleanor, who was generally very shy before strangers, looked at him admiringly and showed little of her usual bashfulness. But Mrs. Goddard seemed ill at ease and tried to keep out of the conversation as much as possible.

"There have been great rejoicings at the prospect

of your arrival," said the vicar when the new-comer had been introduced to both the ladies. "I fancy that if you had let it be known that you were coming down to-day the people would have turned out to meet you at the station."

"The truth is, I rather avoid that sort of thing," said the squire, smiling. "I would rather enter upon my dominions as quietly as possible."

"It is much better for the people, too," remarked Mrs. Ambrose. "Their idea of a holiday is to do no work and have too much beer."

"I daresay that would not hurt them much," answered Mr. Juxon cheerfully. "By the bye, I know nothing about them. I have never been here before. My man of business wanted to come down and show me over the estate, and introduce me to the farmers and all that, but I thought it would be such a bore that I would not have him."

"There is not much to tell, really," said Mr. Ambrose. "The society of Billingsfield is all here," he added with a smile, "including one of your tenants."

"Are you my tenant?" asked Mr. Juxon pleasantly, and he looked at Mrs. Goddard.

"Yes," said she, "I have taken the cottage."

"The cottage? Excuse me, but you know I am a stranger here — what is the cottage?"

"Such a pretty place," answered Mrs. Ambrose, "just opposite the park gate. You must have seen it as you came down."

"Oh, is that it?" said the squire. "Yes, I saw it, and I wished I lived there instead of in the Hall. It looks so comfortable and small. The Hall is a perfect wilderness"

Mrs. Goddard felt a sudden fear lest her new landlord should take it into his head to give her notice. She only took the cottage by the year and her present lease ended in October. The arrival of a squire in possession at the Hall was a catastrophe to which she had not looked forward. The idea troubled her. She had accidentally made Mr. Juxon's acquaintance, and she knew enough of the world to understand that in such a place he would regard her as a valuable addition to the society of the vicar and the vicar's wife. She would meet him constantly; there would be visitors at the Hall — she would have to meet them, too. Her dream of solitude was at an end. For a moment she seemed so nervous that Mr. Juxon observed her embarrassment and supposed it was due to his remark about living in the cottage himself.

"Do not be afraid, Mrs. Goddard," he said quickly, "I am not going to do anything so uncivil as to ask you to give up the cottage. Besides, it would be too small, you know."

"Have you any family, Mr. Juxon?" inquired Mrs. Ambrose with a severity which startled the squire. Mrs. Ambrose thought that if there was a Mrs. Juxon, she had been unpardonably deceived. Of course Mr. Juxon should have said that he was married as soon as he entered the room.

"I have a very large family," answered the squire, and after enjoying for a moment the surprise he saw in Mrs. Ambrose's face, he added with a laugh, "I have a library of ten thousand volumes — a very large family indeed. Otherwise I have no encumbrances, thank heaven."

"You are a scholar?" asked Mr. Ambrose eagerly.

"A book fancier, only a book fancier," returned

the squire modestly. "But I am very fond of the fancy."

"What is a book fancier, mamma?" asked little Eleanor in a whisper. But Mr. Juxon heard the child's question.

"If your mamma will bring you up to the Hall one of these days, Miss Goddard, I will show you. A book fancier is a terrible fellow who has lots of books, and is pursued by a large evil genius telling him he must buy every book he sees, and that he will never by any possibility read half of them before he dies."

Little Eleanor stared for a moment with her great violet eyes, and then turning again to her mother, whispered in her ear.

"Mamma, he called me Miss Goddard!"

"Run out and play in the garden, darling," said her mother with a smile. But the child would not go and sat down on a stool and stared at the squire, who was immensely delighted.

"So you are going to bring all your library, Mr. Juxon?" asked the vicar returning to the charge.

"Yes — and I beg you will make any use of it you please," answered the visitor. "I have a great fondness for books and I think I have some valuable volumes. But I am no great scholar, as you are, though I read a great deal. I have always noticed that the men who accumulate great libraries do not know much, and the men who know a great deal have very few books. Now I will wager that you have not a thousand volumes in your house, Mr. Ambrose."

"Five hundred would be nearer the mark," said the vicar.

"The fewer one has the nearer one approaches to Aquinas's *homo unius libri*," returned the squire. "You are nine thousand five hundred degrees nearer to ideal wisdom than I am."

Mr. Ambrose laughed.

"Nevertheless," he said, "you may be sure that if you give me leave to use your books, I will take advantage of the permission. It is in writing sermons that one feels the want of a good library."

"I should think it would be an awful bore to write sermons," remarked the squire with such perfect innocence that both the vicar and Mrs. Goddard laughed loudly. But Mrs. Ambrose eyed Mr. Juxon with renewed severity.

"I should fancy it would be a much greater bore, as you call it, to the congregation if my husband never wrote any new ones," she said stiffly. Whereat the squire looked rather puzzled, and coloured a little. But Mr. Ambrose came to the rescue.

"Yes, indeed, my wife is quite right. There are no people with such terrible memories as churchwardens. They remember a sermon twenty years old. But as you say, the writing of sermons is not an easy task when a man has been at it for thirty years and more. A man begins by being enthusiastic, then his mind gets into a groove and for some time, if he happens to like the groove, he writes very well. But by and by he has written all there is to be said in the particular line he has chosen and he does not know how to choose another. That is the time when a man needs a library to help him."

"I really don't think you have reached that point, Mr. Ambrose," remarked Mrs. Goddard. She admired the vicar and liked his sermons.

"You are fortunately not in the position of my churchwardens," answered Mr. Ambrose. "You have not been listening to me for thirty years."

"How long have you been my tenant, Mrs. Goddard?" asked the squire.

"Nearly two years," she answered thoughtfully, and her sad eyes rested a moment upon Mr. Juxon's face with an expression he remembered. Indeed he looked at her very often and as he looked his admiration increased, so that when he rose to take his leave the predominant impression of the vicarage which remained in his mind was that of her face. Something of the same fascination took hold of him which had seized upon John Short when he caught sight of Mrs. Goddard through the open door of the study, something of that unexpected interest which in Mrs. Ambrose had at first aroused a half suspicious dislike, now long forgotten.

Before the squire left he invited the whole party to come and dine with him at the Hall on the following Saturday. He must have some kind of a house warming, he said, for he was altogether too lonely up there. Mrs. Goddard would bring Eleanor, of course; they would dine early — it would not be late for the little girl. If they all liked they could call it tea instead of dinner. Of course everything was topsy-turvy in the Hall, but they would excuse that. He hoped to establish friendly relations with his vicar and with his tenant — his fair tenant. Might he call soon and see whether there was anything that could be done to improve the cottage? Before the day when they were all coming to dine? He would call to-morrow, then. Anything that needed doing should be done, Mrs. Goddard might

be sure. When the books arrived he would let Mr. Ambrose know, of course, and they would have a day together.

So he went away, leaving the impression that he was a very good-natured and agreeable man. Even Mrs. Ambrose was mollified. He had shocked her by his remark about sermon writing, but he had of course not meant it, and he appeared to mean to be very civil. It was curious to see how all severity vanished from Mrs. Ambrose's manner so soon as th stranger who aroused it was out of sight and hearing. She appeared as a formidably stern type of the British matron to the chance visitors who came to the vicarage; but they were no sooner gone than her natural temper was restored and she was kindness and geniality itself.

But Mrs. Goddard was very thoughtful. She was not pleased at the fact of an addition to the Billingsfield community, and yet she liked the appearance of the squire. He had declared his intention of calling upon her on the following day, and she would be bound to receive him. She was young, she had been shut off from the world for two years, and the prospect of Mr. Juxon's acquaintance was in itself not unpleasant; but the idea that he was to be permanently established in the Hall frightened her. She had felt since she came to Billingsfield that from the very first she had put herself upon a footing of safety by telling her story to the vicar. But the vicar would not without her permission repeat that story to Mr. Juxon. Was she herself called upon to do so? She was a very sensitive woman, and her impressionable nature had been strongly affected by what she had suffered. An almost morbid fear of

seeming to make false pretences possessed her. She was more than thirty years of age, it is true, but she saw plainly enough in her glass that she was more than passably good-looking still. There were one or two grey threads in her brown waving hair and she took no trouble to remove them; no one ever noticed them. There were one or two lines, very faint lines, in her forehead; no one ever saw them. She could hardly see them herself. Supposing — why should she not suppose it? — supposing Mr. Juxon were to take a fancy to her, as a lone bachelor of forty and odd might easily take a fancy to a pretty woman who was his tenant and lived at his gate, what should she do? He was an honest man, and she was a conscientious woman; she could not deceive him, if it came to that. She would have to tell him the whole truth. As she thought of it, she turned pale and trembled. And yet she had liked his face, she had told him he might call at the cottage, and her woman's instinct foresaw that she was to see him often. It was not vanity which made her think that the squire might grow to like her too much. She had had experiences in her life and she knew that she was attractive; the very fear she had felt for the last two years lest she should be thrown into the society of men who might be attracted by her, increased her apprehension tenfold. She could not look forward with indifference to the expected visit, for the novelty of seeing any one besides the vicar and his wife was too great; she could not refuse to see the squire, for he would come again and again until she received him; and yet, she could not get rid of the idea that there was danger in seeing him. Call it as one may, that woman's instinct of peril is rarely at fault.

In the late twilight of the June evening Mrs. Goddard and Eleanor walked home together by the broad road which led towards the park gate.

"Don't you think Mr. Juxon is very kind, mamma?" asked the child.

"Yes, darling, I have no doubt he is. It was very good of him to ask you to go to the Hall."

"And he called me Miss Goddard," said Eleanor. "I wonder whether he will always call me Miss Goddard."

"He did not know your name was Nellie," explained her mother.

"Oh, I wish nobody knew, mamma. It was so nice. When shall I be grown up, mamma?"

"Soon, my child — too soon," said Mrs. Goddard with a sigh. Nellie looked at her mother and was silent for a minute.

"Mamma, do you like Mr. Juxon?" she asked presently.

"No, dear — how can one like anybody one has only seen once?"

"Oh — but I thought you might," said Nellie. "Don't you think you will, mamma? Say you will — do!"

"Why?" asked her mother in some surprise. "I cannot say anything about it. I daresay he is very nice."

"It will be so delightful to go to the Hall to dinner and be waited on by big real servants — not like Susan at the vicarage, or Martha. Won't you like it, mamma? Of course Mr. Juxon will have real servants, just like — like poor papa." Nellie finished her speech rather doubtfully as though not sure how her mother would take it. Mrs. Goddard sighed

again, but said nothing. She could not stop the child's talking — why should Nellie not speak of her father? Nellie did not know.

"I think it will be perfectly delightful," said Nellie, seeing she got no answer from her mother, and as though putting the final seal of affirmation to her remarks about the Hall. But she appeared to be satisfied at not having been contradicted and did not return to the subject that evening.

Mr. Juxon lost no time in keeping his word and on the following morning at about eleven o'clock, when Mrs. Goddard was just hearing the last of Nellie's lesson in geography and little Nellie herself was beginning to be terribly tired of acquiring knowledge in such very warm weather, the squire's square figure was seen to emerge from the park gate opposite, clad in grey knickerbockers and dark green stockings, a rose in his buttonhole and a thick stick in his hand, presenting all the traditional appearance of a thriving country gentleman of the period. He crossed the road, stopped a moment and whistled his dog to heel and then opened the wicket gate that led to the cottage. Nellie sprang to the window in wild excitement.

"Oh what a dog!" she cried. "Mamma, *do* come and see! And Mr. Juxon is coming, too — he has green stockings!"

But Mrs. Goddard, who was not prepared for so early a visit, hastily put away what might be described as the débris of Nellie's lessons, to wit, a much thumbed book of geography, a well worn spelling book, a very particularly inky piece of blotting paper, a pen of which most of the stock had been subjected to the continuous action of Nellie's teeth

for several months, and an ancient doll, without the assistance of which, as a species of Stokesite *memoria technica*, Nellie declared that she could not say her lessons at all. Those things disappeared, and, with them, Nellie's troubles, into a large drawer set apart for the purpose. By the time Mr. Juxon had rung the bell and Martha's answering footstep was beginning to echo in the small passage, Mrs. Goddard had passed to the consideration of Nellie herself. Nellie's fingers were mightily inky, but in other respects she was presentable.

"Run and wash your hands, child, and then you may come back," said her mother.

"Oh mamma, *must* I go? He's just coming in." She gave one despairing look at her little hands, and then ran away. The idea of missing one moment of Mr. Juxon's visit was bitter, but to be caught with inky fingers by a beautiful gentleman with green stockings and a rose in his coat would be more terribly humiliating still. There was a sound as of some gigantic beast plunging into the passage as the front door was opened, and a scream of terror from Martha followed by a good-natured laugh from the squire.

"You'll excuse *me*, sir, but he don't bite, sir, does he? Oh my! what a dog he is, sir—"

"Is Mrs. Goddard in?" inquired Mr. Juxon, holding the hound by the collar. Martha opened the door of the little sitting-room and the squire looked in. Martha fled down the passage.

"Oh my! What a tremendious dog that is, to be sure!" she was heard to exclaim as she disappeared into the back of the cottage.

"May I come in?" asked Mr. Juxon, rather timidly

and with an expression of amused perplexity on his brown face. "Lie down, Stamboul!"

"Oh, bring him in, too," said Mrs. Goddard coming forward and taking Mr. Juxon's hand. "I am so fond of dogs." Indeed she was rather embarrassed and was glad of the diversion.

"He is really very quiet," said the squire apologetically, "only he is a little impetuous about getting into a house." Then, seeing that Mrs. Goddard looked at the enormous animal with some interest and much wonder, he added, "he is a Russian bloodhound — perhaps you never saw one? He was given to me in Constantinople, so I call him Stamboul — good name for a big dog is not it?"

"Very," said Mrs. Goddard rather nervously. Stamboul was indeed an exceedingly remarkable beast. Taller than the tallest mastiff, he combined with his gigantic strength and size a grace and swiftness of motion which no mastiff can possess. His smooth clean coat, of a perfectly even slate colour throughout, was without folds, close as a greyhound's, showing every articulation and every swelling muscle of his body. His broad square head and monstrous jaw betrayed more of the quickness and sudden ferocity of the tiger than those suggested by the heavy, lion-like jowl of the English mastiff. His ears, too, were close cropped, in accordance with the Russian fashion, and somehow the compactness this gave to his head seemed to throw forward and bring into prominence his great fiery eyes, that reflected red lights as he moved, and did not tend to inspire confidence in the timid stranger.

"Do sit down," said Mrs. Goddard, and when the squire was seated Stamboul sat himself down upon

his haunches beside him, and looked slowly from his master to the lady and back again, his tongue hanging out as though anxious to hear what they might have to say to each other.

"I thought I should be sure to find you in the morning," began Mr. Juxon, after a pause. "I hope I have not disturbed you?"

"Oh, not at all. Nellie has just finished her lessons."

"The fact is," continued the squire, "that I was going to survey the nakedness of the land which has fallen to my lot, and as I came out of the park I saw the cottage right before me and I could not resist the temptation of calling. I had no idea we were such near neighbours."

"Yes," said Mrs. Goddard, "it is very near."

Mr. Juxon glanced round the room. He was not exactly at a loss for words, but Mrs. Goddard did not seem inclined to encourage the conversation. He saw that the room was not only exceedingly comfortable but that its arrangement betrayed a considerable taste for luxury. The furniture was of a kind not generally seen in cottages, and appeared to have formed part of some great establishment. The carpet itself was of a finer and softer kind than any at the Hall. The writing-table was a piece of richly inlaid work, and the implements upon it were of the solid, severe and valuable kind that are seen in rich men's houses. A clock which was undoubtedly of the Louis Quinze period stood upon the chimney-piece. On the walls were hung three or four pictures which, Mr. Juxon thought, must be both old and of great value. Upon a little table by the fireplace lay four or five objects of Chinese jade and

Japanese ivory and a silver chatelaine of old workmanship. The squire saw, and wondered why such a very pretty woman, who possessed such very pretty things, should choose to come and live in his cottage in the parish of Billingsfield. And having seen and wondered he became interested in his charming tenant and endeavoured to carry on the conversation in a more confidential strain.

CHAPTER V.

"You have done more towards beautifying the cottage than I could have hoped to do," said Mr. Juxon, leaning back in his chair and resting one hand on Stamboul's great head.

"It was very pretty of itself," answered Mrs. Goddard, "and fortunately it is not very big, or my things would look lost in it."

"I should not say that — you have so many beautiful things. They seem to suit the place so well. I am sure you will never think of taking them away."

"Not if I can help it — I am too glad to be quiet."

"You have travelled a great deal, Mrs. Goddard?" asked the squire.

"No — not exactly that — only a little, after all. I have not been to Constantinople for instance," she added looking at the hound Mr. Juxon had brought from the East. "You are indeed a traveller."

"I have travelled all my life," said the squire, indifferently, as though the subject of his wanderings did not interest him. "From what little I have seen of Billingsfield I fancy you will find all the quiet you could wish, here. Really, I realise that at my own gate I must come to you for information. What sort of man is that excellent rector down there, whom I met last night?"

The squire's tone became more confidential as he put the question.

"Well — he is not a rector, to begin with," answered Mrs. Goddard with a smile, "he is the vicar, and he is a most good man, whom I have always found most kind."

"I can readily fancy that," said Mr. Juxon. "But his wife seems to be of the severe type."

"No — she struck me so at first, too. I think it is only with strangers. She is such a motherly sort of woman, you do not know! She only has that little manner when you first meet her."

"What a strange thing that is!" remarked the squire, looking at Mrs. Goddard. "The natural belief of English people in each other's depravity until they have had time to make acquaintance! And is there no one else here — no doctor — no doctor's wife?"

"Not a soul," answered Mrs. Goddard. "There is a doctor, but the vicarage suspects him of free thought. He certainly never goes to church. He has no wife."

"This is the most Arcadian retreat I ever was in. Upon my word, I am a very lucky man."

"I suppose that it must be a relief when one has travelled so much," replied Mrs. Goddard.

"Or suffered very much," added the squire, half unconsciously, looking at her sad face.

"Yes," she answered. At that moment the door opened and Nellie entered the room, having successfully grappled with the inkstains. She went straight to the squire, and held out her hand, blushing a little, but looking very pretty. Then she saw the huge head of Stamboul who looked up at her with a ferociously agreeable canine smile, and thwacked the carpet with his tail as he sat; Nellie started back.

"Oh, what a dog!" she exclaimed. But very soon she was on excellent terms with him; little Nellie was not timid, and Stamboul, who liked people who were not afraid of him and was especially fond of children, did his best to be amusing.

"He is a very good dog," remarked Mr. Juxon. "He once did me a very good service."

"How was that?"

"I was riding in the Belgrade forest one summer. I was alone with Stamboul following. A couple of ruffians tried to rob me. Stamboul caught one of them."

"Did he hurt him very much?"

"I don't know — he killed him before the fellow could scream, and I shot the other," replied the squire calmly.

"What a horrible story!" exclaimed Mrs. Goddard, turning pale. "Come here, Nellie — don't touch that dreadful dog!"

"Do not be afraid — he is perfectly harmless. Come here Stamboul!" The huge beast obeyed, wagging his tail, and sat down at his master's feet, still looking rather wistfully at Nellie who had been playing with him. "You see," continued Mr. Juxon, "he is as quiet as a lamb — would not hurt a fly!"

"I think it is dreadful to have such animals about," said Mrs. Goddard in a low voice, still looking at the dog with horror.

"I am sorry I told you. It may prejudice you against him. I only meant to explain how faithful he is, that is all. You see a man grows fond of a creature that has saved his life."

"I suppose so, but it is rather startling to see such an animal so near to one. I fear I am very nervous."

"By the bye," said the squire with the bold irrelevancy of a man who wants to turn the subject, "are you fond of flowers?"

"I?" said Mrs. Goddard in surprise. "Yes — very. Why?"

"I thought you would not mind if I had the garden here improved a little. One might put in a couple of frames. I did not see any flowers about. I am so fond of them myself, you see, that I always look for them."

"You are very kind," answered Mrs. Goddard. "But I would not have you take any trouble on my account. We are so comfortable and so fond of the cottage already —"

"Well, I hope you will grow to like it even better," returned the squire with a genial smile. "Anything I can do, you know —" he rose as though to take his leave. "Excuse me, but may I look at that picture? Andrea del Sarto? Yes, I thought so — wonderful — upon my word, in a cottage in Billingsfield. Where did you find it?"

"It was my husband's," said Mrs. Goddard.

"Ah — ah, yes," said the squire in a subdued tone. "I beg your pardon," he added, as people often do, unconsciously, when they fancy they have accidentally roused in another a painful train of thought. Then he turned to go. "We dine at half-past seven, you know, so as to be early for Miss Nellie," he said, as he went out.

Mrs. Goddard was glad he was gone, though she felt that he was not unsympathetic. The story of the dog had frightened her, and her own mention of her husband had made her nervous and sad. More than ever she felt that fear of being in a false posi-

tion, which had assailed her when she had first met the squire on the previous evening. He had at once opened relations with her in a way which showed that he intended to be intimate; he had offered to improve her cottage, had insisted upon making frames in her garden, had asked her to dinner with the Ambroses and had established the right to talk to her whenever he got a chance. He interested her, too, which was worse. His passing references to his travels and to his adventures, of which he spoke with the indifference of a man accustomed to danger, his unassuming manner, his frank ways — everything about him awakened her interest. She had supposed that in two years the very faculty of being interested by a man would be dulled if not destroyed; she found to her annoyance that though she had seen Mr. Juxon only twice she could not put him out of her thoughts. She was, moreover, a nervous, almost morbid, woman, and the natural result of trying to forget his existence was that she could think of nothing else.

How much better it would be, she thought, if he knew her story from the first. He might then be as friendly as he pleased; there would be no danger in it, to him or to her. She almost determined to go at once and ask the vicar's advice. But by the time she had nearly made up her mind it was the hour for luncheon, and little Nellie's appetite was exigent. By the time lunch was over her determination had changed. She had reflected that the vicar would think her morbid, that, with his usual good sense, he would say there was no necessity for telling the squire anything; indeed, that to do so would be undignified. If the squire were indeed going to

lead the life of a recluse as he proposed doing, he was not really a man to cause her any apprehension. If he had travelled about the world for forty years without having his heart disturbed by any of the women he must have met in that time, he was certainly not the kind of man, when once he had determined to settle in his home, to fall in love with the first pretty woman he met. It was absurd; there was no likelihood of it; it was her own miserable vanity, she told herself, which made the thing seem probable, and she would not think any more about it. She, a woman thirty-one years of age, with a daughter who ere long would be growing up to womanhood! To be afraid of a mere stranger like Mr. Juxon — afraid lest he should fall in love with her! Could anything be more ridiculous? Her duty was to live quietly as she had lived before, to take no more notice of the squire than was necessary in order to be civil, and so all would be well.

And so it seemed for a long time. The squire improved the garden of the cottage and Mrs. Goddard and Nellie, with the Ambroses, dined at the Hall, which at first seemed an exceedingly dreary and dismal place, but which, as they returned thither again and again, grew more and more luxurious, till the transformation was complete. Mr. Juxon brought all manner of things to the house; vans upon vans arrived, laden with boxes of books and pictures and oriental carpets and rare objects which the squire had collected in his many years of travel, and which he appeared to have stored in London until he had at last inherited the Hall. The longer the Ambroses and Mrs. Goddard knew him, the more singularly impressed they were with his reticence concerning

himself. He appeared to have been everywhere, to have seen everything, and he had certainly brought back a vast collection of more or less valuable objects from his travels, besides the large library he had accumulated and which contained many rare and curious editions of ancient books. He was evidently a man of very good education, and a much better scholar than he was willing to allow. The vicar delighted in his society and when the two found themselves together in the great room which Mr. Juxon had lined with well-filled shelves, they remained for hours absorbed in literary and scholastic talk. But whenever the vicar approached the subject of the squire's past life, the latter became vague and gave ambiguous answers to any direct questions addressed to him. He evidently disliked talking of himself, though he would talk about anything else that occurred to him with a fluency which Mrs. Ambrose declared was the only un-English thing about him. The consequence was that the vicar became more and more interested in his new acquaintance, and though the squire was so frank and honest a man that it was impossible to suspect him of any doubtful action in the past, Mr. Ambrose suspected that he had a secret. Indeed after hearing the story Mrs. Goddard had confided to his ears, nothing would have surprised the vicar. After finding that so good, so upright and so honourable a woman as the fair tenant of the cottage could be put into such a singularly painful position as that in which she now found herself, it was not hard to imagine that this singular person who had inherited the Hall might also have some weighty reason for loving the solitude of Billingsfield.

To chronicle the small events which occurred in that Arcadian parish, would be to overstep the bounds of permissible tediousness. In such places all events move slowly and take long to develop to their results. The passions which in our own quickly moving world spring up, flourish, wither and are cut down in a month require, when they are not stimulated by the fertilising heat of artificial surroundings, a longer period for their growth; and when that growth is attained they are likely to be stronger and more deeply rooted. It is not true that the study of them is less interesting, nor that they have less importance in themselves. The difficulty of narrative is greater when they are to be described, for it is necessary to carry the imagination in a short time over a long period, to show how from small incidents great results follow, and to show also how the very limited and trivial nature of the surroundings may cause important things to be overlooked. Amidst such influences acquaintance is soon made between the few persons so thrown together, but each is apt to regard such new acquaintance merely as bearing upon his or her own particular interests. It is surprising to see how people will live side by side in solitude, even in danger, in distant settlements, in the mining districts of the West, in up-country stations in India, on board ship, even, for months and years, without knowing anything of each other's previous history; whereas in the crowded centres of civilisation and society the first questions are "Where does he come from?" "What are his antecedents?" "What has he done in the world?" And unless a man can answer such inquiries to the general satisfaction he is likely to be heavily

handicapped in the social race. But in more primitive situations men are ruled by more primitive feelings of mutual respect; it is considered that a man should not be pressed to speak of things he shows no desire to discuss and that, provided he does not interfere with his neighbour's wellbeing, his past life is nobody's business. One may feel curiosity concerning him, but under no circumstances is one justified in asking questions.

For these reasons, although Mr. Juxon's arrival and instalment in the Hall were regarded with satisfaction by the little circle at Billingsfield, while he himself was at once received into intimacy and treated with cordial friendliness, he nevertheless represented in the minds of all an unsolved enigma. And to the squire the existence of one of the circle was at least as problematical as his own life could seem to any of them. The more he saw of Mrs. Goddard, the more he wondered at her and speculated about her and the less he dared to ask her any questions. But he understood from Mr. Ambrose's manner, that the vicar at least was in possession of her secret, and he inferred from what he was able to judge about the vicar's character that the latter was not a man to extend his friendship to any one who did not deserve it. Whatever Mrs. Goddard's story was, he felt sure that her troubles had not been caused by her own misconduct. She was in every respect what he called a good woman. Of course, too, she was a widow; the way in which she spoke of her husband implied that, on those rare occasions when she spoke of him at all. Charles James Juxon was a gentleman, whatever course of life he had followed before settling in the country, and he did not

feel that he should be justified in asking questions about Mrs. Goddard of the vicar. Besides, as time went on and he found his own interest in her increasing, he began to nourish the hope that he might one day hear her story from her own lips. In his simplicity it did not strike him that he himself had grown to be an object of interest to her.

Somehow, during the summer and autumn of that year, Mrs. Goddard contracted a habit of watching the park gate from the window of the cottage, particularly at certain hours of the day. It was only a habit, but it seemed to amuse her. She used to sit in the small bay window with her books, reading to herself or teaching Nellie, and it was quite natural that from time to time she should look out across the road. But it rarely happened, when she was installed in that particular place, that Mr. Juxon failed to appear at the gate, with his dog Stamboul, his green stockings, his stick and the inevitable rose in his coat. Moreover he generally crossed the road and, if he did not enter the cottage and spend a quarter of an hour in conversation, he at least spoke to Mrs. Goddard through the open window. It was remarkable, too, that as time went on what at first had seemed the result of chance, recurred with such invariable regularity as to betray the existence of a fixed rule. Nellie, too, who was an observant child, had ceased asking questions but watched her mother with her great violet eyes in a way that made Mrs. Goddard nervous. Nellie liked the squire very much but though she asked her mother very often at first whether she, too, was fond of that nice Mr. Juxon, the answers she received were not encouraging. How was it possible, Mrs. Goddard asked, to

speak of liking anybody one had known so short a time? And as Nellie was quite unable to answer such an inquiry, she desisted from her questions and applied herself to the method of personal observation. But here, too, she was met by a hopeless difficulty. The squire and her mother never seemed to have any secrets, as Nellie would have expressed it. They met daily, and daily exchanged very much the same remarks concerning the weather, the garden, the vicar's last sermon. When they talked about anything else, they spoke of books, of which the squire lent Mrs. Goddard a great number. But this was a subject which did not interest Nellie very much; she was not by any means a prodigy in the way of learning, and though she was now nearly eleven years old was only just beginning to read the Waverley novels. On one occasion she remarked to her mother that she did not believe a word of them and did not think they were a bit like real life, but the momentary fit of scepticism soon passed and Nellie read on contentedly, not omitting however to watch her mother in order to find out, as her small mind expressed it, "whether mamma really liked that nice Mr. Juxon." Events were slowly preparing themselves which would help her to come to a satisfactory conclusion upon that matter.

Mr. Juxon himself was in a very uncertain state of mind. After knowing Mrs. Goddard for six months, and having acquired the habit of seeing her almost every day, he found to his surprise that she formed a necessary part of his existence. It need not have surprised him, for in spite of that lady's surmise with regard to his early life, he was in reality a man of generous and susceptible tempera-

ment. He recognised in the charming tenant of the cottage many qualities which he liked, and he could not deny that she was exceedingly pretty. Being a strong man he was particularly attracted by the pathetic expression of her face, the perpetual sadness that was visible there when she was not momentarily interested or amused. Had he suspected her paleness and air of secret suffering to be the result of any physical infirmity, she would not have interested him so much. But Mrs. Goddard's lithe figure and easy grace of activity belied all idea of weakness. It was undoubtedly some hidden suffering of mind which lent that sadness to her voice and features, and which so deeply roused the sympathies of the squire. At the end of six months Mr. Juxon was very much interested in Mrs. Goddard, but despite all his efforts to be agreeable he seemed to have made no progress whatever in the direction of banishing her cares. To tell the truth, it did not enter his mind that he was in love with her. She was his tenant; she was evidently very unhappy about something; it was therefore undeniably his duty as a landlord and as a gentleman to make life easy for her.

He wondered what the matter could be. At first he had been inclined to think that she was poor and was depressed by poverty. But though she lived very simply, she never seemed to be in difficulties. Five hundred pounds a year go a long way in the village of Billingsfield. It was certainly not want of money which made her unhappy. The interest of the sum represented by the pictures hung in her little sitting-room, not to mention the other objects of value she possessed, would have been alone sufficient

to afford her a living. The squire himself would have given her a high price for these things, but in six months she never in the most distant manner suggested that she wished to part with them. The idea then naturally suggested itself to Mr. Juxon's mind that she was still mourning for her husband, and that she would probably continue to mourn for him until some one, himself for instance, succeeded in consoling her for so great a loss.

The conclusion startled the squire. That was not precisely the part he contemplated playing, nor the species of consolation he proposed to offer. Mrs. Goddard was indeed a charming woman, and the squire liked charming women and delighted in their society. But Mr. Juxon was a bachelor of more than forty years standing, and he had never regarded marriage as a thing of itself, for himself, desirable. He immediately thrust the idea from his mind with a mental "*vade retro Satanas!* and determined that things were very agreeable in their present state, and might go on for ever; that if Mrs. Goddard was unhappy that did not prevent her from talking very pleasantly whenever he saw her, which was nearly every day, and that her griefs were emphatically none of his business. Before very long however Mr. Juxon discovered that though it was a very simple thing to make such a determination it was a very different thing to keep it. Mrs. Goddard interested him too much. When he was with her he was perpetually longing to talk about herself instead of about the weather and the garden and the books, and once or twice he was very nearly betrayed into talking about himself, a circumstance so extraordinary that Mr. Juxon imagined he must be either ill or going

mad, and thought seriously of sending for the doctor. He controlled the impulse, however, and temporarily recovered; but strange to say from that time forward the conversation languished when he found himself alone with Mrs. Goddard, and it seemed very hard to maintain their joint interest in the weather, the garden and the books at the proper standard of intensity. They had grown intimate, and familiarity had begun to breed a contempt of those petty subjects upon which their intimacy had been founded. It is not clear why this should be so, but it is true, nevertheless, and many a couple before Charles Juxon and Mary Goddard had found it out. As the interest of two people in each other increases their interest in things, as things, diminishes in like ratio, and they are very certain ultimately to reach that point described by the Frenchman's maxim — "a man should never talk to a woman except of herself or himself."

If Mr. Juxon was not in love with Mary Goddard he was at least rapidly approaching a very dangerous state; for he saw her every day and could not let one day go by without seeing her, and moreover he grew silent in her company, to a degree which embarrassed her and made him feel himself more stupid than he had ever dreamed possible; so that he would sometimes stay too long, in the hope of finding something to say, and sometimes he would leave her abruptly and go and shut himself up with his books, and busy himself with his catalogues and his bindings and the arrangement of his rare editions. One day at last, he felt that he had behaved so very absurdly that he was ashamed of himself, and suddenly disappeared for nearly a week. When he returned he said he

had been to town to attend a great sale of books, which was perfectly true; he did not add that the learned expert he employed in London could have done the business for him just as well. But the trip had done him no good, for he grew more silent than ever, and Mrs. Goddard even thought his brown face looked a shade paler; but that might have been the effect of the winter weather. Ordinary sunburn she reflected, as she looked at her own white skin in the mirror, will generally wear off in six months, though freckles will not.

If Mr. Juxon was not in love, it would be very hard to say what Mary Goddard felt. It was not true that time was effacing the memory of the great sorrow she had suffered. It was there still, that memory, keen and sharp as ever; it would never go away again so long as she lived. But she had been soothed by the quiet life in Billingsfield; the evidences of the past had been removed far from her, she had found in the Reverend Augustin Ambrose one of those rare and manly natures who can keep a secret for ever without ever referring to its existence even with the person who has confided it. For a few days she had hesitated whether to ask the vicar's advice about Mr. Juxon or not. She had thought it her duty to allow Mr. Ambrose to tell the squire whatever he thought fit of her own story. But she had changed her mind, and the squire had remained in ignorance. It was best so, she thought; for now, after more than six months, Mr. Juxon had taken the position of a friend towards her, and, as she thought, showed no disposition whatever to overstep the boundaries of friendship. The regularity of his visits and the sameness of the conversation seemed

of themselves a guarantee of his simple goodwill. It did not strike her as possible that if he were going to fall in love with her at all, that catastrophe should be postponed beyond six months from their first acquaintance. Nor did it seem extraordinary to her that she should actually look forward to those visits, and take pleasure in that monotonous intercourse. Her life was very quiet; it was natural that she should take whatever diversion came in her way, and should even be thankful for it. Mr. Juxon was an honest gentleman, a scholar and a man who had seen the world. If what he said was not always very original it was always very true, a merit not always conceded to the highest originality. He spoke intelligently; he told her the news; he lent her the newest books and reviews, and offered her his opinions upon them, with the regularity of a daily paper. In such a place, where communications with the outer world seemed as difficult as at the antipodes, and where the remainder of society was limited to the household of the vicarage, what wonder was it if she found Mr. Juxon an agreeable companion, and believed the companionship harmless?

But far down in the involutions of her feminine consciousness there was present a perpetual curiosity in regard to the squire, a curiosity she never expected to satisfy, but was wholly unable to repress. Under the influence of this feeling she made remarks from time to time of an apparently harmless nature, but which in the squire promoted that strange inclination to talk about himself, which he had lately observed and which caused him so much alarm. He said to himself that he had nothing to be concealed, and that if any one had asked him direct questions

concerning his past he would have answered them boldly enough. But he knew himself to be so singularly averse to dwelling on his own affairs that he wondered why he should now be impelled to break through so good a rule. Indeed he had not the insight to perceive that Mrs. Goddard lost no opportunity of leading him to the subject of his various adventures, and, if he had suspected it, he would have been very much surprised.

Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose were far from guessing what an intimacy had sprung up between the two. Both the cottage and the Hall lay at a considerable distance from the vicarage, and though Mrs. Ambrose occasionally went to see Mrs. Goddard at irregular hours in the morning and afternoon, it was remarkable that the squire never called when she was there. Once Mrs. Ambrose arrived during one of his visits, but thought it natural enough that Mr. Juxon should drop in to see his tenant. Indeed when she called the two were talking about the garden — as usual.

CHAPTER VI.

JOHN SHORT had almost finished his hard work at college. For two years and a half he had laboured on acquiring for himself reputation and a certain amount of more solid advantage in the shape of scholarships. Never in that time had he left Cambridge even for a day unless compelled to do so by the regulations of his college. His father had found it hard to induce him to come up to town; and, being in somewhat easier circumstances since John had declared that he needed no further help to complete his education, he had himself gone to see his son more than once. But John had never been to Billingsfield and he knew nothing of the changes that had taken place there. At last, however, Short felt that he must have some rest before he went up for honours; he had grown thin and even pale; his head ached perpetually, and his eyes no longer seemed so good as they had been. He went to a doctor, and the doctor told him that with his admirable constitution a few days of absolute rest would do all that was necessary. John wrote to Mr. Ambrose to say that he would at last accept the invitation so often extended and would spend the week between Christmas and New Year's day at Billingsfield.

There were great rejoicings at the vicarage. John had never been forgotten for a day since he had left, each successive step in his career had been hailed with

hearty delight, and now that at last he was coming back to rest himself for a week before the final effort Mrs. Ambrose was as enthusiastic as her husband. Even Mrs. Goddard, who was not quite sure whether she had ever seen John or not, and the squire who had certainly never seen him, joined in the general excitement. Mrs. Goddard asked the entire party to tea at the cottage and the squire asked them to come and skate at the Hall and to dine afterwards; for the weather was cold and the vicar said John was a very good skater. Was there anything John could not do? There was nothing he could not do much better than anybody else, answered Mr. Ambrose; and the good clergyman's pride in his pupil was perhaps not the less because he had at first received him on charitable considerations, and felt that if he had risked much in being so generous he had also been amply rewarded by the brilliant success of his undertaking.

When John arrived, everybody said he was "so much improved." He had got his growth now, being close upon one and twenty years of age; his blue eyes were deeper set; his downy whiskers had disappeared and a small moustache shaded his upper lip; he looked more intellectual but not less strong, though Mrs. Ambrose said he was dreadfully pale — perhaps he owed some of the improvement observed in his appearance to the clothes he wore. Poor boy, he had been but scantily supplied in the old days; he looked prosperous, now, by comparison.

"We have had great additions to our society, since you left us," said the vicar. "We have got a squire at the Hall, and a lady with a little girl at the cottage."

"Such a nice little girl," remarked Mrs. Ambrose.

When John found out that the lady at the cottage was no other than the lady in black to whom he had lost his heart two years and a half before, he was considerably surprised. It would be absurd to suppose that the boyish fancy which had made so much romance in his life for so many months could outlast the excitements of the University. It would be absurd to dignify such a fancy by any serious name. He had grown to be a man since those days and he had put away childish things. He blushed to remember that he had spent hours in writing odes to the beautiful unknown, and whole nights in dreaming of her face. And yet he could remember that as much as a year after he had left Billingsfield he still thought of her as his highest ideal of woman, and still occasionally composed a few verses to her memory, regretting, perhaps, the cooling of his poetic ardour. Then he had gradually lost sight of her in the hard work which made up his life. Profound study had made him more prosaic and he believed that he had done with ideals for ever, after the manner of many clever young fellows who at one and twenty feel that they are separated from the follies of eighteen by a great and impassable gulf. The gulf, however, was not in John's case so wide nor so deep but what, at the prospect of being suddenly brought face to face, and made acquainted, with her who for so long had seemed the object of a romantic passion, he felt a strange thrill of surprise and embarrassment. Those meetings of later years generally bring painful disillusion. How many of us can remember some fair-haired little girl who in our childhood represented to us the very incarnation of feminine grace and beauty, for whom we fetched and carried, for whom we bound nosegays on the heath

and stole apples from the orchard and climbed upon the table after desert, if we were left alone in the dining-room, to lay hands on some beautiful sweetmeat wrapped in tinsel and fringes of pink paper — have we not met her again in after-life, a grown woman, very, very far from our ideal of feminine grace and beauty? And still in spite of changes in herself and ourselves there has clung to her memory through all those years enough of romance to make our heart beat a little faster at the prospect of suddenly meeting her, enough to make us wonder a little regretfully if she was at all like the little golden-haired child we loved long ago.

But with John the feeling was stronger than that. It was but two years and a half since he had seen Mrs. Goddard, and, not even knowing her name, had erected for her a pedestal in his boyish heart. There was moreover about her a mystery still unsolved. There was something odd and strange in her one visit to the vicarage, in the fact that the vicar had never referred to that visit and, lastly, it seemed unlike Mr. Ambrose to have said nothing of her settlement in Billingsfield in the course of all the letters he had written to John since the latter had left him. John dwelt upon the name — Goddard — but it held no association for him. It was not at all like the names he had given her in his imagination. He wondered what she would be like and he felt nervously anxious to meet her. Somehow, too, what he heard of the squire did not please him; he felt an immediate antagonism to Mr. Juxon, to his books, to his amateur scholarship, even to his appearance as described by Mrs. Ambrose, who said he was such a thorough Englishman and wondered how he kept his hair so smooth.

It was not long before he had an opportunity of judging for himself of what Mr. Ambrose called the recent addition to Billingsfield society. On the very afternoon of his arrival the vicar proposed to walk up to the Hall and have a look at the library, and John readily assented. It was Christmas Eve and the weather, even in Essex, was sharp and frosty. The muddy road was frozen hard and the afternoon sun, slanting through the oak trees that bordered the road beyond the village, made no perceptible impression on the cold. The two men walked briskly in the direction of the park gate. Before they had quite reached it however, the door of the cottage opposite was opened, and Stamboul, the Russian bloodhound, bounded down the path, cleared the wicket gate in his vast stride, and then turning suddenly crouched in the middle of the road to wait for his master. But the dog instantly caught sight of the vicar, with whom he was on very good terms, and trotted slowly up to him, thrusting his great nose into his hand, and then proceeding to make acquaintance with John. He seemed to approve of the stranger, for he gave a short sniff of satisfaction and trotted back to the wicket of the cottage. At this moment Mrs. Goddard and Nellie came out, followed by the squire arrayed in his inevitable green stockings. There was however no rose in his coat. Whether the greenhouses at the Hall had failed to produce any in the bitter weather, or whether Mr. Juxon had transferred the rose from his coat to the possession of Mrs. Goddard, is uncertain. The three came out into the road where the vicar and John stood still to meet them.

"Mrs. Goddard," said the clergyman, "this is Mr.

Short, of whom you have heard — John, let me introduce you to Mr. Juxon."

John felt that he blushed violently as he took Mrs. Goddard's hand. He would not have believed that he could feel so much embarrassed, and he hated himself for betraying it. But nobody noticed his colour. The weather was bright and cold, and even Mrs. Goddard's pale and delicate skin had a rosy tinge.

"We were just going for a walk," she explained.

"And we were going to see you at the Hall," said the vicar to Mr. Juxon.

"Let us do both," said the latter. "Let us walk to the Hall and have a cup of tea. We can look at the ice and see whether it will bear to-morrow."

Everybody agreed to the proposal, and it so fell out that the squire and the vicar went before while John and Mrs. Goddard followed and Nellie walked between them, holding Stamboul by the collar, and talking to him as she went. John looked at his companion, and saw with a strange satisfaction that his first impression, the impression he had cherished so long, had not been a mistaken one. Her deep violet eyes were still sad, beautiful and dreamy. Her small nose was full of expression, and was not reddened by the cold as noses are wont to be. Her rich brown hair waved across her forehead as it did on that day when John first saw her; and now as he spoke with her, her mouth smiled, as he had been sure it would. John felt a curious sense of pride in her, in finding that he had not been deceived, that this ideal of whom he had dreamed was really and truly very good to look at. He knew little of the artist's rules of beauty; he had often

looked with wonder at the faces in the illustrations to Dr. Smith's classical dictionary, and had tried to understand where the beauty of them lay, and at Cambridge he had seen and studied with interest many photographs and casts from the antiques. But to his mind the antique would not bear comparison for a moment with Mrs. Goddard, who resembled no engraving nor photograph nor cast he had ever seen.

And she, too, looked at him, and said to herself that he did not look like what she had expected. He looked like a lean, fresh young Englishman of moderate intelligence and in moderate circumstances. And yet she knew that he was no ordinary young fellow, that he was wonderfully gifted, in fact, and likely to make a mark in the world. She resolved to take a proper interest in him.

"Do you know," she said, "I have heard so much about you, that I feel as though I had met you before, Mr. Short."

"We really have met," said John. "Do you remember that hot day when you came to the vicarage and I waked up Muggins for you?"

"Yes — was that you? You have changed. That is, I suppose I did not see you very well in the hurry."

"I suppose I have changed in two years and a half. I was only a boy then, you know. But how have you heard so much about me?"

"Billingsfield," said Mrs. Goddard with a faint smile, "is not a large place. The Ambroses are very fond of you and always talk of what you are doing."

"And so you really live here, Mrs. Goddard?

How long is it since you came? Mr. Ambrose never told me — "

"I have been here more than two years — two years last October," she answered quietly.

"The very year I left — only a month after I was gone. How strange!"

Mrs. Goddard looked up nervously. She was frightened lest John should have made any deductions from the date of her arrival. But John was thinking in a very different train of thought.

"Why is it strange?" she asked.

"Oh, I hardly know," said John in considerable embarrassment. "I was only thinking — about you — that is, about it all."

The answer did not tend to quiet Mrs. Goddard's apprehensions.

"About me?" she exclaimed. "Why should you think about me?"

"It was very foolish, of course," said John. "Only, when I caught sight of you that day I was very much struck. You know, I was only a boy, then. I hoped you would come back — but you did not." He blushed violently, and then glanced at his companion to see whether she had noticed it.

"No," she said, "I did not come back for some time."

"And then I was gone. Mr. Ambrose never told me you had come."

"Why should he?"

"Oh, I don't know. I think he might. You see Billingsfield has been a sort of home to me, and it is a small place; so I thought he might have told me the news."

"I suppose he thought it would not interest you," said Mrs. Goddard. "I am sure I do not know why it should. But you must be very fond of the place, are you not?"

"Very. As I was saying, it is very like home to me. My father lives in town you know — that is not at all like home. One always associates the idea of home with the country, and a vicarage and a Hall, and all that."

"Does one?" said Mrs. Goddard, picking her way over the frozen mud of the road. "Take care, Nellie, it is dreadfully slippery!"

"How much she has grown," remarked John, looking at the girl's active figure as she walked before them. "She was quite a little girl when I saw her first."

"Yes, she grows very fast," answered Mrs. Goddard rather regretfully.

"You say that as though you were sorry."

"I? No. I am glad to see her grow. What a funny remark."

"I thought you spoke sadly," explained John.

"Oh, dear no. Only she is coming to the awkward age."

"She is coming to it very gracefully," said John, who wanted to say something pleasant.

"That is the most any of us can hope to do," answered Mrs. Goddard with a little smile. "We all have our awkward age, I suppose."

"I should not think you could remember yours."

"Why? Do you think it was so very long ago?" Mrs. Goddard laughed.

"No — I cannot believe you ever had any," said John.

The boyish compliment pleased Mrs. Goddard. It was long since any one had flattered her, for flattery did not enter into the squire's system for making himself agreeable.

"Do they teach that sort of thing at Cambridge?" she asked demurely.

"What sort of thing?"

"Making little speeches to ladies," said she.

"No — I wish they did," said John, laughing. "I should know much better how to make them. We learn how to write Greek odes to moral abstractions."

"What a dreadful thing to do!" exclaimed Mrs. Goddard.

"Do you think so? I do not know. Now, for instance, I have written a great many Greek odes to you —"

"To me?" interrupted his companion in surprise.

"Do you think it is so very extraordinary?"

"Very."

"Well — you see — I only saw you once — you won't laugh?"

"No," said Mrs. Goddard, who was very much amused, and was beginning to think that John Short was the most original young man she had ever met.

"I only saw you once, when you came to the vicarage, and I had not the least idea what your name was. But I — I hoped you would come back; and so I used to write poems to you. They were very good, too," added John in a meditative tone, "I have never written any nearly so good as they were."

"Really?" Mrs. Goddard looked at him rather incredulously and then laughed.

"You said you would not laugh," objected John.

"I cannot help it in the least," said she. "It seems so funny."

"It did not seem funny to me, I can assure you," replied John rather warmly. "I thought it very serious."

"You don't do it now, do you?" asked Mrs. Goddard, looking up at him quietly.

"Oh no — a man's ideals change so much, you know," answered John, who felt he had been foolishly betrayed into telling his story, and hated to be laughed at.

"I am very glad of that. How long are you going to stay here, Mr. Short?"

"Until New Year's Day, I think," he answered. "Perhaps you will have time to forget about the poetry before I go."

"I don't know why," said Mrs. Goddard, noticing his hurt tone. "I think it was very pretty — I mean the way you did it. You must be a born poet — to write verses to a person you did not know and had only seen once!"

"It is much easier than writing verses to moral abstractions one has never seen at all," explained John, who was easily pacified. "When a man writes a great deal he feels the necessity of attaching all those beautiful moral qualities to some real, living person whom he can see — "

"Even if he only sees her once," remarked Mrs. Goddard demurely.

"Yes, even if he only sees her once. You have no idea how hard it is to concentrate one's faculties upon a mere idea; but the moment a man sees a woman whom he can endow with all sorts of beautiful qualities — why it's just as easy as hunting."

"I am glad to have been of so much service to you, even unconsciously — but, don't you think perhaps Mrs. Ambrose would have done as well?"

"Mrs. Ambrose?" repeated John. Then he broke into a hearty laugh. "No — I have no hesitation in saying that she would not have done as well. I am deeply indebted to Mrs. Ambrose for a thousand kindnesses, for a great deal more than I can tell — but, on the whole, I say, no; I could not have written odes to Mrs. Ambrose."

"No, I suppose not. Besides, fancy the vicar's state of mind! She would have had to call him in to translate your poetry."

"It is very singular," said John in a tone of reflection. "But, if I had not done all that, we should not be talking as we are now, after ten minutes acquaintance."

"Probably not," said Mrs. Goddard.

"No — certainly not. By the bye, there is the Hall. I suppose you have often been there since Mr. Juxon came — what kind of man is he?"

"He has been a great traveller," answered his companion. "And then — well, he is a scholar and has an immense library — "

"And an immense dog — yes, but I mean, what kind of man is he himself?"

"He is very agreeable," said Mrs. Goddard quietly. "Very well bred, very well educated. We find him a great addition in Billingsfield."

"I should think so, if he is all you say," said John discontentedly. His antagonism against Mr. Juxon was rapidly increasing. Mrs. Goddard looked at him in some surprise, being very far from understanding his tone.

"I think you will like him," she said. "He knows all about you from the Ambroses, and he always speaks of you with the greatest admiration."

"Really? It is awfully kind of him, I am sure. I am very much obliged," said John rather contemptuously.

"Why do you speak like that?" asked Mrs. Goddard gravely. "You cannot possibly have any cause for disliking him. Besides, he is a friend of ours —"

"Oh, of course, then it is different," said John. "If he is a friend of yours —"

"Do you generally take violent dislikes to people at first sight, Mr. Short?"

"Oh, dear no. Not at all — at least, not dislikes. I suppose Mr. Juxon's face reminds me of somebody I do not like. I will behave like an angel. Here we are."

The effect of this conversation upon the two persons between whom it took place was exceedingly different. Mrs. Goddard was amused, without being altogether pleased. She had made the acquaintance of a refreshingly young scholar whom she understood to be full of genius. He was enthusiastic, simple, seemingly incapable of concealing anything that passed through his mind, unreasonable and evidently very susceptible. On the whole, she thought she should like him, though his scornful manner in speaking of the squire had annoyed her. The interest she could feel in him, if she felt any at all, would be akin to that of the vicar in the boy. He was only a boy; brilliantly talented, they said, but still a mere boy. She was fully ten years older than he — she might almost be his mother — well, not quite that, but very nearly. It was amusing to think of his

writing odes to her. She wished she could see translations of them, and she almost made up her mind to ask him to show them to her.

John on the other hand experienced a curious sensation. He had never before been in the society of so charming a woman. He looked at her and looked again, and came to the conclusion that she was not only charming but beautiful. He had not the least idea of her age; it is not the manner of his kind to think much about the age of a woman, provided she is not too young. The girl might be ten. Mrs. Goddard might have married at sixteen — twenty-six, twenty-seven — what was that? John called himself twenty-two. Five years was simply no difference at all! Besides, who cared for age?

He had suddenly found himself almost on a footing of intimacy with this lovely creature. His odes had served him well; it had pleased her to hear the story. She had laughed a little, of course; but women, as John knew, always laugh when they are pleased. He would like to show her his odes. As he walked through the park by her side he felt a curious sense of possession in her which gave him a thrill of exquisite delight; and when they entered the Hall he felt as though he were resigning her to the squire, which gave him a corresponding sense of annoyance. When an Englishman experiences these sensations, he is in love. John resolved that whatever happened he would walk back with Mrs. Goddard.

"Come in," said the squire cheerily. "We are not so cold as we used to be up here."

A great fire of logs was burning upon the hearth in the Hall. Stamboul stalked up to the open chimney, scratched the tiger's skin which served for a rug,

and threw himself down as though his day's work were done. Mr. Juxon went up to Mrs. Goddard.

"I think you had better take off your coat," he said. "The house is very warm."

Mrs. Goddard allowed the squire to help her in removing the heavy black jacket lined and trimmed with fur, which she wore. John eyed the proceeding uneasily and kept on his greatcoat.

"Thank you — I don't mind the heat," he said shortly when the squire suggested to him that he might be too warm. John was in a fit of contrariety. Mrs. Goddard glanced at him, as he spoke, and he thought he detected a twinkle of amusement in her eyes, which did not tend to smooth his temper.

"You will have some tea, Mrs. Goddard?" said Mr. Juxon, leading the way into the library, which he regarded as the most habitable room in the house. Mrs. Goddard walked by his side and the vicar followed, while John and Nellie brought up the rear.

"Is not it a beautiful place?" said Nellie, who was anxious that the new-comer should appreciate the magnificence of the Hall.

"Can't see very well," said John, "it is so dark."

"Oh, but it is beautiful," insisted Miss Nellie. "And they have lots of lamps here in the evening. Perhaps Mr. Juxon will have them lighted before we go. He is always so kind."

"Is he?" asked John with a show of interest.

"Yes — he brings mamma a rose every day," said Nellie.

"Not really?" said John, beginning to feel that he was justified in hating the squire with all his might.

"Yes — and books, too. Lots of them — but then,

he has so many. See, this is the library. Is not it splendid!"

John looked about him and was surprised. The last rays of the setting sun fell across the open lawn and through the deep windows of the great room, illuminating the tall carved bookcases, the heavily gilt bindings, the rich, dark Russia leather and morocco of the folios. The footsteps of the party fell noiselessly upon the thick carpet and almost insensibly the voices of the visitors dropped to a lower key. A fine large wood fire was burning on the hearth, carefully covered with a metal netting lest any spark should fly out and cause damage to the treasures accumulated in the neighbouring shelves.

"Pray make yourself at home, Mr. Short," said the squire, coming up to John. "You may find something of interest here. There are some old editions of the classics that are thought rare — some specimens of Venetian printing, too, that you may like to look at. Mr. Ambrose can tell you more about them than I."

John's feeling of antagonism, and even his resentment against Mr. Juxon, roused by Nellie's innocent remark about the roses, were not proof against the real scholastic passion aroused by the sight of rare and valuable books. In a few minutes he had divested himself of his greatcoat and was examining the books with an expression of delight upon his face which was pleasant to see. He glanced from time to time at the other persons in the room and looked very often at Mrs. Goddard, but on the whole he was profoundly interested in the contents of the library. Mrs. Goddard was installed in a huge leathern easy-chair by the fire, and the squire was handing her one after another a number of new volumes which lay upon a small

table, and which she appeared to examine with interest. Nellie knew where to look for her favourite books of engravings and had curled herself up in a corner absorbed in "Hyde's Royal Residences." The vicar went to look for something he wanted to consult.

"What do you think of our new friend?" asked Mrs. Goddard of the squire. She spoke in a low tone and did not look up from the new book he had just handed her.

"He appears to have a very peculiar temper," said Mr. Juxon. "But he looks clever."

"What do you think he was talking about as we came through the park?" asked Mrs. Goddard.

"What?"

"He was saying that he saw me once before he went to college, and — fancy how deliciously boyish! he said he had written ever so many Greek odes to my memory since!" Mrs. Goddard laughed a little and blushed faintly.

"Let us hope, for the sake of his success, that you may continue to inspire him," said the squire gravely. "I have no doubt the odes were very good."

"So he said. Fancy!"

CHAPTER VII.

Mrs. Goddard did not mean to walk home with John; but on the other hand she did not mean to walk with the squire. She revolved the matter in her mind as she sat in the library talking in an undertone with Mr. Juxon. She liked the great room, the air of luxury, the squire's tea and the squire's conversation. It is worth noticing that his flow of talk was more abundant to-day than it had been for some time; whether it was John's presence which stimulated Mr. Juxon's imagination, or whether Mrs. Goddard had suddenly grown more interesting since John Short's appearance it is hard to say; it is certain that Mr. Juxon talked better than usual.

The afternoon, however, was far spent and the party had only come to make a short visit. Mrs. Goddard rose from her seat.

"Nellie, child, we must be going home," she said, calling to the little girl who was still absorbed in the book of engravings which she had taken to the window to catch the last of the waning light.

John started and came forward with alacrity. The vicar looked up; Nellie reluctantly brought her book back.

"It is very early," objected the squire. "Really, the days have no business to be so short."

"It would not seem like Christmas if they were long," said Mrs. Goddard.

"It does not seem like Christmas anyhow," remarked John, enigmatically. No one understood his observation and no one paid any attention to it. Whereupon John's previous feeling of annoyance returned and he went to look for his greatcoat in the dark corner where he had laid it.

"You must not come all the way back with us," said Mrs. Goddard as they all went out into the hall and began to put on their warm things before the fire. "Really — it is late. Mr. Ambrose will give me his arm."

The squire insisted however, and Stamboul, who had had a comfortable nap by the fire, was of the same opinion as his master and plunged wildly at the door.

"Will you give me your arm, Mr. Ambrose?" said Mrs. Goddard, looking rather timidly at the vicar as they stood upon the broad steps in the sparkling evening air. She felt that she was disappointing both the squire and John, but she had quite made up her mind. She had her own reasons. The vicar, good man, was unconsciously a little flattered by her choice, as with her hand resting on the sleeve of his greatcoat he led the way down the park. The squire and John were fain to follow together, but Nellie took her mother's hand, and Stamboul walked behind affecting an unusual gravity.

"You must come again when there is more daylight," said Mr. Juxon to his companion.

"Thank you," said John. "You are very good." He intended to relapse into silence, but his instinct made him ashamed of seeming rude. "You have a magnificent library," he added presently in a rather cold tone.

"You have been used to much better ones in Cambridge," said the squire, modestly.

"Do you know Cambridge well, Mr. Juxon?"

"Very well. I am a Cambridge man, myself."

"Indeed?" exclaimed John, immediately discovering that the squire was not so bad as he had thought. "Indeed! I had no idea. Mr. Ambrose never told me that."

"I am not sure that he is aware of it," said Mr. Juxon quietly. "The subject never happened to come up."

"How odd!" remarked John, who could not conceive of associating with a man for any length of time without asking at what University he had been.

"I don't know," answered Mr. Juxon. "There are lots of other things to talk about."

"Oh — of course," said John, in a tone which did not express conviction.

Meanwhile Mr. Ambrose and Mrs. Goddard walked briskly in front; so briskly in fact that Nellie occasionally jumped a step, as children say, in order to keep up with them.

"What a glorious Christmas eve!" exclaimed Mrs. Goddard, as they turned a bend in the drive and caught sight of the western sky still clear and red. "And there is the new moon!" The slender crescent was hanging just above the fading glow.

"Oh mamma, have you wished?" cried Nellie. "You must, you know, when you see the new moon!"

Mrs. Goddard did not answer, but she sighed faintly and drew a little closer to the worthy vicar as she walked. She always wished, whether there

was a new moon or not, and she always wished the same wish. Perhaps Mr. Ambrose understood, for he was not without tact. He changed the subject.

"How do you like our John Short?" he asked.

"Very much, I think," answered Mrs. Goddard. "He is so fresh and young."

"He is a fine fellow. I was sure you would like him. Is he at all like what you fancied he would be?"

"Well no — not exactly. I know you told me how he looked, but I always thought he would be rather Byronic — the poetical type, if you know what I mean."

"He has a great deal of poetry in him," said Mr. Ambrose in a tone of profound admiration. "He writes the best Greek verse I ever saw."

"Oh yes — I daresay," replied Mrs. Goddard smiling in the dusk. "I am sure he must be very clever."

So they chatted quietly as they walked down the park. But the squire and John did not make progress in their conversation, and by the time they reached the gate they had yielded to an awkward silence. They had both been annoyed because Mrs. Goddard had taken the vicar's arm instead of choosing one of themselves, but the joint sense of disappointment did not constitute a common bond of interest. Either one would have suffered anything rather than mention Mrs. Goddard to the other in the course of the walk. And yet Mr. Juxon might have been John's father. At the gate of the cottage they separated. The squire said he would turn back. Mrs. Goddard had reached her destination. John and the vicar would return to the vicarage. John tried to linger a moment, to get a word with Mrs. Goddard. He was so persistent that she let him fol-

low her through the wicket gate and then turned quickly.

"What is it?" she asked, rather suddenly, holding out her hand to say good-bye.

"Oh, nothing," answered John. "That is — would you like to see one of those — those little odes of mine?"

"Yes, certainly, if you like," she answered frankly, and then laughed. "Of course I would. Good-night."

He turned and fled. The vicar was waiting for him, and eyed him rather curiously as he came back. Mr. Juxon was standing in the middle of the road, making Stamboul jump over his stick, backwards and forwards.

"Good-night," he said, pausing in his occupation. The vicar and John turned away and walked homewards. Before they turned the corner towards the village John instinctively looked back. Mr. Juxon was still making Stamboul jump the stick before the cottage, but as far as he could see in the dusk, Mrs. Goddard and Nellie had disappeared within. John felt that he was very unhappy.

"Mr. Ambrose," he began. Then he stopped and hesitated. "Mr. Ambrose," he continued at last, "you never told me half the news of Billingsfield in your letters."

"You mean about Mrs. Goddard? Well — no — I did not think it would interest you very much."

"She is a very interesting person," said John. He could have added that if he had known she was in Billingsfield he would have made a great sacrifice in order to come down for a day to make her acquaintance. But he did not say it.

"She is a great addition," said the vicar.

"Oh — very great, I should think."

Christmas eve was passed at the vicarage in preparation for the morrow. Mrs. Ambrose was very active in binding holly wherever it was possible to put it. The mince-pies were tasted and pronounced a success, and old Reynolds was despatched to the cottage with a small basket containing a certain number of them as a present to Mrs. Goddard. An emissary appeared from the Hall with a variety of articles which the squire begged to contribute towards the vicar's Christmas dinner; among others a haunch of venison which Mrs. Ambrose pronounced to be in the best condition. The vicar retorted by sending to the Hall a magnificent Cottenham cheese which, as a former Fellow of Trinity, he had succeeded in obtaining. Moreover Mr. Ambrose himself descended to the cellar and brought up several bottles of Audit ale which he declared must be allowed to stand some time in the pantry in order to bring out the flavour and to be thoroughly settled. John gave his assistance wherever it was needed and enjoyed vastly the old-fashioned preparations for Christmas day. It was long since the season had brought him such rejoicing and he intended to rejoice with a good will towards men and especially towards the Ambroses. After dinner the whole party, consisting of three highly efficient persons and old Reynolds, adjourned to the church to complete the decorations for the morrow.

The church of Billingsfield, known as St. Mary's, was quite large enough to contain twice the entire population of the parish. It was built upon a part of the foundations of an ancient abbey, and the vicar

was very proud of the monument of a crusading Earl of Oxford which he had caused to be placed in the chancel, it having been discovered in the old chancel of the abbey in the park, far beyond the present limits of the church. The tower was the highest in the neighbourhood. The whole building was of gray rubble, irregular stones set together with a crumbling cement, and presented an appearance which, if not architecturally imposing, was at least sufficiently venerable. At the present time the aisles were full of heaped-up holly and wreaths; a few lamps and a considerable number of tallow candles shed a rather feeble light amongst the pillars; a crowd of school children, not yet washed for the morrow, were busy under the directions of the schoolmistress in decorating the chancel; Mr. Thomas Reid the conservative sexton was at the top of a tall ladder, presumably using doubtful language to himself as every third nail he tried to drive into the crevices of the stone "crooked hisself and larfed at him," as he expressed it; the organ was playing and a dozen small boys with three or four men were industriously practising the anthem "Arise, Shine," producing strains which if not calculated altogether to elevate the heart by their harmony, would certainly have caused the hair of a sensitive musician to rise on end; three or four of the oldest inhabitants were leaning on their sticks in the neighbourhood of the great stove in the middle aisle, warming themselves and grumbling that "times warn't as they used to be:" Mr. Abraham Boosey was noisily declaring that he had "cartlods more o' thim greens" to come, and Muggins, who had had some beer, was stumbling cheerfully against the pews in his efforts to bring a huge load of fir

branches to the foot of Mr. Thomas Reid's long ladder. It was a thorough Christmas scene and John Short's heart warmed as he came back suddenly to the things which for three years had been so familiar to him and which he had so much missed in his solitude at Cambridge. Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose set to work and John followed their example. Even the prickly holly leaves were pleasant to touch and there was a homely joy in the fir branches dripping with half melted snow.

Before they had been at work very long, John was aware of a little figure, muffled in furs and standing beside him. He looked up and saw little Nellie's lovely face and long brown curls.

"Can't I help you, Mr. Short?" she asked timidly. "I like to help, and they won't let me."

"Who are 'they' ?" asked John kindly, but looking about for the figure of Nellie's mother.

"The schoolmistress and Mrs. Ambrose. They said I should dirty my frock."

"Well," said John, doubtfully, "I don't know. Perhaps you would. But you might hold the string for me — that won't hurt your clothes, you know."

"There are more greens this year," remarked Nellie, sitting down upon the end of the choir bench where John was at work and taking the ball of string in her hand. "Mr. Juxon has sent a lot from the park."

"He seems to be always sending things," said John, who had no reason whatever for saying so, except that the squire had sent a hamper to the vicarage. "Did he stay long before dinner?" he added, in the tone people adopt when they hope to make children talk.

"Stay long where?" asked Nellie innocently.

"Oh, I thought he went into your house after we left you," answered John.

"Oh no — he did not come in," said Nellie. John continued to work in silence. At some distance from where he was, Mrs. Goddard was talking to Mrs. Ambrose. He could see her graceful figure, but he could hardly distinguish her features in the gloom of the dimly-lighted church. He longed to leave Nellie and to go and speak to her, but an undefined feeling of hurt pride prevented him. He would not forgive her for having taken the vicar's arm in coming home through the park; so he stayed where he was, pricking his fingers with the holly and rather impatiently pulling the string off the ball which Nellie held. If Mrs. Goddard wanted to speak to him, she might come of her own accord, he thought, for he felt that he had behaved foolishly in asking if she wished to see his odes. Somehow, when he thought about it, the odes did not seem so good now as they had seemed that afternoon.

Mrs. Goddard had not seen him at first, and for some time she remained in consultation with Mrs. Ambrose. At last she turned and looking for Nellie saw that she was seated beside John; to his great delight she came towards him. She looked more lovely than ever, he thought; the dark fur about her throat set off her delicate, sad face like a frame.

"Oh — are you here, too, Mr. Short?" she said.

"Hard at work, as you see," answered John. "Are you going to help, Mrs. Goddard? Won't you help me?"

"I wanted to," said Nellie, appealing to her mother, "but they would not let me, so I can only hold the string."

"Well, dear — we will see if we can help Mr. Short," said Mrs. Goddard good-naturedly, and she sat down upon the choir bench.

John never forgot that delightful Christmas Eve. For nearly two hours he never left Mrs. Goddard's side, asking her advice about every branch and bit of holly and following out to the letter her most minute suggestions. He forgot all about the squire and about the walk back from the park, in the delight of having Mrs. Goddard to himself. He pushed the school children about and spoke roughly to old Reynolds if her commands were not instantly executed; he felt in the little crowd of village people that he was her natural protector, and he wished he might never have anything in the world to do save to decorate a church in her company. He grew more and more confidential and when the work was all done he felt that he had thoroughly established himself in her good graces and went home to dream of the happiest day he had ever spent. The organ ceased playing, the little choir dispersed, the school children were sent home, Mr. Abraham Boosey retired to the bar of the Duke's Head, Muggins tenderly embraced every tombstone he met on his way through the churchyard, the "gentlefolk" followed Reynolds' lantern towards the vicarage, and Mr. Thomas Reid, the conservative and melancholic sexton, put out the lights and locked the church doors, muttering a sour laudation of more primitive times, when "the gentlefolk minded their business."

For the second time that day, John and Mr. Ambrose walked as far as the cottage, to see Mrs. Goddard to her home. When they parted from her and Nellie, John was careful not to say anything

more about the odes, a subject to which Mrs. Goddard had not referred in the course of the evening. John thanked her rather effusively for her help — he could never have got through those choir benches without her, he said; and the vicar added that he was very much obliged, too, and surreptitiously conveyed to Mrs. Goddard's hand a small package intended for Miss Nellie's Christmas stocking, from him and his wife, and which he had forgotten to give earlier. Nellie was destined to have a fuller stocking than usual this year, for the squire had remembered her as well as Mr. Ambrose.

John went to bed in his old room at the vicarage protesting that he had enjoyed the first day of his holiday immensely. As he blew out the light, he thought suddenly how often in that very room he had gone to bed dreaming about the lady in black and composing verses to her, till somehow the Greek terminations would get mixed up with the Latin roots, the quantities all seemed to change places, and he used to fall asleep with a delicious half romantic sense of happiness always unfulfilled yet always present. And now at last it began to be fulfilled in earnest; he had met the lady in black at last, had spent nearly half a day in her company and was more persuaded than ever that she was really and truly his ideal. He did not go to sleep so soon as in the old days, and he was sorry to go to sleep at all; he wanted to enjoy all his delicious recollections of that afternoon before he slept and, as he recapitulated the events which had befallen him and recalled each expression of the face that had charmed him and every intonation of the charmer's voice, he felt that he had never been really happy before, that no amount of success at

Cambridge could give him half the delight he had experienced during one hour in the old Billingsfield church, and that altogether life anywhere else was not worth living. To-morrow he would see Mrs. Goddard again, and the next day and the day after that and then — "bother the future!" ejaculated John, and went to sleep.

He awoke early, roused by the loud clanging of the Christmas bells, and looking out he saw that the day was fine and cold and bright as Christmas day should be, and generally is. The hoar frost was frozen into fantastic shapes upon his little window, the snow was clinging to the yew branches outside and the robins were hopping and chirping over the thin crust of frozen snow that just covered the ground. The road was hard and brown as on the previous day, and the ice in the park would probably bear. Perhaps Mrs. Goddard would skate in the afternoon between the services, but then — Juxon would be there. "Never mind Juxon," quoth John to himself, "it is Christmas day!"

At the vicarage and elsewhere, all over the land, those things were done which delight the heart of Englishmen at the merry season. Everybody shook hands with everybody else, everybody cried "Merry Christmas!" to his neighbour in the street, with an intonation as though he were saying something startlingly new and brilliant which had never been said before. Every labourer who had a new smock-frock put it on, and those who had none had at least a bit of new red worsted comforter about their throats and began the day by standing at their doors in the cold morning, smoking a "ha'p'orth o' shag" in a new clay pipe, greeting each other across the village

street. Muggins, who had spent a portion of the night in exchanging affectionate Christmas wishes with the tombstones in the churchyard, appeared fresh and ruddy at an early hour, clad in the long black coat and tall hat which he was accustomed to wear when he drove Mr. Boosey's fly on great festivals. Most of the cottages in the single street sported a bit of holly in their windows, and altogether the appearance of Billingsfield was singularly festive and mirthful. At precisely ten minutes to eleven the vicar and Mrs. Ambrose, accompanied by John, issued from the vicarage and went across the road by the private path to the church. As they entered the porch Mr. Reid, who stood solemnly tolling the small bell, popularly nicknamed the "Ting-tang," and of which the single rope passed down close to the south door, vouchsafed John a sour smile of recognition. John felt as though he had come home.

Mrs. Goddard and Nellie appeared a moment afterwards and took their seats in the pew traditionally belonging to the cottage, behind that of the squire who was always early, and the sight of whose smoothly brushed hair and brown beard was a constant source of satisfaction to Mrs. Ambrose. John and Mrs. Ambrose sat on the opposite side of the aisle, but John's eyes strayed very frequently towards Mrs. Goddard; so frequently indeed that she noticed it and leaned far back in her seat to avoid his glance. Whereupon John blushed and felt that the vicar, who was reading the Second Lesson, had probably noticed his distraction. It was hard to realise that two years and a half had passed since he had sat in that same pew; perhaps, however, the presence of Mrs. Goddard helped him to understand

the lapse of time. But for her it would have been very hard; for the vicar's voice sounded precisely as it used to sound; Mrs. Ambrose had not lost her habit of removing one glove and putting it into her prayer book as a mark while she found the hymn in the accompanying volume; the bright decorations looked as they looked years ago above the organ and round the chancel; from far down the church, just before the sermon, came the old accustomed sound of small boys shuffling their hobnailed shoes upon the stone floor and the audible guttural whisper of the churchwarden admonishing them to "mind the stick;" the stained-glass windows admitted the same pleasant light as of yore — all was unchanged. But Mrs. Goddard and Nellie occupied the cottage pew, and their presence alone was sufficient to mark to John the fact that he was now a man.

The service was sympathetic to John Short. He liked the simplicity of it, even the rough singing of the choir, as compared with the solemn and magnificent musical services of Trinity College Chapel. But it seemed very long before it was all over and he was waiting for Mrs. Goddard outside the church door.

There were more greetings, more "Merry Christmas" and "Many happy returns." Mrs. Goddard looked more charming than ever and was quite as cordial as on the previous evening.

"How much better it all looked this morning by daylight," she said.

"I think it looked very pretty last night," answered John. "There is nothing so delightful as Christmas decorations, is there?"

"Perhaps you will come down next year and help us again?" suggested Mrs. Goddard.

"Yes — well, I might come at Easter, for that matter," answered the young man, who after finding it impossible to visit Billingsfield during two years and a half, now saw no difficulty whatever in the way of making two visits in the course of six months. "Do you still decorate at Easter?" he asked.

"Oh yes — do you think you can come?" she said pleasantly. "I thought you were to be very busy just then."

"Yes, that is true," answered John. "But of course I could come, you know, if it were necessary."

"Hardly exactly necessary — " Mrs. Goddard laughed.

"The doctor told me some relaxation was absolutely indispensable for my health," said John rather sententiously.

"You don't really look very ill — are you?" She seemed incredulous.

"Oh no, of course not — only a little overworked sometimes."

"In that case I have no doubt it would do you good," said Mrs. Goddard.

"Do you really think so?" asked John, hopefully.

"Oh — that is a matter for your doctor to decide. I cannot possibly tell," she answered.

"I think you would make a very good doctor, Mrs. Goddard," said John venturing on a bolder flight.

"Really — I never thought of trying it," she replied with a little laugh. "Good morning, Mr. Ambrose. Nellie wants to thank you for your beautiful present. It was really too good of you."

The vicar came out of the vestry and joined the group in the path. Mrs. Ambrose, who had been asking Tom Judd's wife about her baby, also came

up, and the squire, who had been presenting Mr. Reid with ten shillings for his Christmas box and who looked singularly bereaved without the faithful Stamboul at his heels, sauntered up and began congratulating everybody. In the distance the last of the congregation, chiefly the old women and cripples who could not keep up with the rest, hobbled away through the white gate of the churchyard.

It had been previously agreed that if the ice would bear there should be skating in the afternoon and the squire was anxious to inform the party that the pond was in excellent condition.

"As black as your hat," he said cheerfully. "Stamboul and I have been sliding all over it, so of course it would bear an ox. It did not crack anywhere."

"Do you skate, Mrs. Goddard?" asked John.

"Not very well — not nearly so well as Nellie. But I am very fond of it."

"Will you let me push you about in a chair, then? It is capital fun."

"Very good fun for me, no doubt," answered Mrs. Goddard, laughing.

"I would rather do it than anything else," said John in a tone of conviction. "It is splendid exercise, pushing people about in chairs."

"So it is," said the squire, heartily. "We will take turns, Mr. Short." The suggestion did not meet with any enthusiastic response from John, who wished Mr. Juxon were not able to skate.

Poor John, he had but one idea, which consisted simply in getting Mrs. Goddard to himself as often and as long as possible. Unfortunately this idea did not coincide with Mr. Juxon's views. Mr. Juxon

was an older, slower and calmer man than the enthusiastic young scholar, and though very far from obtruding his views or making any assertion of his rights, was equally far from forgetting them. He was a man more of actions than words. He had been in the habit of monopolising Mrs. Goddard's society for months and he had no intention of relinquishing his claims, even for the charitable purpose of allowing a poor student to enjoy his Christmas holiday and bit of romance undisturbed. If John had presented himself as a boy, it might have been different; but John emphatically considered himself a man, and the squire was quite willing to treat him as such, since he desired it. That is to say he would not permit him to "cut him out" as he would have expressed it. The result of the position in which John and Mr. Juxon soon found themselves was to be expected.

CHAPTER VIII.

JOHN did not sleep so peacefully nor dream so happily that night as on the night before. The course of true love had not run smooth that afternoon. The squire had insisted upon having his share of the lovely Mrs. Goddard's society and she herself had not seemed greatly disturbed at a temporary separation from John. The latter amused her for a little while; the former held the position of a friend whose conversation she liked better than that of other people. John was disappointed and thought of going back to Cambridge the next day. So strong, indeed, was his sudden desire to leave Billingsfield without finishing his visit, that before going to bed he had packed some of his belongings into his small portmanteau; the tears almost stood in his eyes as he busied himself about his room and he muttered certain formulæ of self-accusation as he collected his things, saying over and over in his heart — "What a fool I am! Why should she care for me? What am I that she should care for me?" etc. etc. Then he opened his window and looked at the bright stars which shone out over the old yew tree; but it was exceedingly cold, and so he shut it again and went to bed, feeling very uncomfortable and unhappy.

But when he awoke in the morning he looked at his half-packed portmanteau and laughed, and in-

stead of saying "What a fool I am!" he said "What a fool I was!" — which is generally and in most conditions of human affairs a much wiser thing to say. Then he carefully took everything out of the portmanteau again and replaced things as they had lain before in his room, lest perchance Susan, the housemaid, should detect what had passed through his mind on the previous evening and should tell Mrs. Ambrose. And from all this it appears that John was exceedingly young, as indeed he was, in spite of his being nearly one and twenty years of age. But doubtless if men were willing to confess their disappointments and foolish, impetuous resolutions, many would be found who have done likewise, being in years much older than John Short. Unfortunately for human nature most men would rather confess to positive wrong-doing than to any such youthful follies as these, while they are young; and when they are old they would rather be thought young and foolish than confess the evil deeds they have actually done.

John, however, did not moralise upon his situation. The weather was again fine and as he dressed his spirits rose. He became magnanimous and resolved to forget yesterday and make the most of today. He would see Mrs. Goddard of course; perhaps he would show her a little coldness at first, giving her to understand that she had not treated him well on the previous afternoon; then he would interest her by his talk — he would repeat to her one of those unlucky odes and translate it for her benefit, making use of the freedom he would thus get in order to make her an unlimited number of graceful compliments. Perhaps, too, he ought to pay more atten-

tion to Nellie, if he wished to conciliate her mother. Women, he reflected, have such strange prejudices!

He wondered whether it would be proper for him to call upon Mrs. Goddard. He was not quite sure about it, and he was rather ashamed of having so little knowledge of the world; but he believed that in Billingsfield he might run the risk. There had been talk of skating again that morning, and so, about ten o'clock, John told Mr. Ambrose he would go for a short walk and then join them all at the pond in the park. The project seemed good, and he put it into execution. As he walked up the frozen road, he industriously repeated in his mind the Greek verses he was going to translate to Mrs. Goddard; he had no copy of them but his memory was very good. He met half a dozen labourers, strolling about with their pipes until it was time to go and have a pint of beer, as is their manner upon holidays; they touched their hats to him, remembering his face well, and he smiled happily at the rough fellows, contrasting his situation with theirs, who from the misfortune of social prejudice were not permitted to go and call upon Mrs. Goddard. His heart beat rather fast as he went up to the door of the cottage, and for one unpleasant moment he again doubted whether it was proper for him to make such an early visit. But being bent on romantic adventure he rang boldly and inquired for Mrs. Goddard.

She was surprised to see John at that hour and alone; but it did not enter her head to refuse him admittance. Indeed as he stood in the little passage he heard the words which passed between her and Martha.

"What is it, Martha?"

"It's a young gentleman, mam. I rather think, mam, it's the young gentleman that's stopping at the vicarage."

"Oh — ask him to come in."

"In 'ere, mam?"

"No — into the sitting-room," said Mrs. Goddard, who was busy in the dining-room.

John was accordingly ushered in and told to wait a minute; which he did, surveying with surprise the beautiful pictures, the rich looking furniture and the valuable objects that lay about upon the tables. He experienced a thrill of pleasure, for he felt sure that Mrs. Goddard possessed another qualification which he had unconsciously attributed to her — that of being accustomed to a certain kind of luxury, which in John's mind was mysteriously connected with his romance. It is one of the most undefinable of the many indefinite feelings to which young men in love are subject, especially young men who have been, or are, very poor. They like to connect ideas of wealth and comfort, even of a luxurious existence, with the object of their affections. They desire the world of love to be new to them, and in order to be wholly new in their experience, it must be rich. The feeling is not so wholly unworthy as it might seem; they instinctively place their love upon a pedestal and require its surroundings to be of a better kind than such as they have been accustomed to in their own lives. King Cophetua, being a king, could afford to love the beggar maid, and a very old song sings of a "lady who loved a swine," but the names of the poor young men who have loved above their fortune and station are innumerable as the swallows in spring. John saw that Mrs. God-

dard was much richer than he had ever been, and without the smallest second thought was pleased. In a few moments she entered the room. John had his speech ready.

"I thought, if you were going to skate, I would call and ask leave to go with you," he said glibly, as she gave him her hand.

"Oh — thanks. But is not it rather early?"

"It is twenty minutes past ten," said John, looking at the clock.

"Well, let us get warm before starting," said Mrs. Goddard, sitting down by the fire. "It is so cold this morning."

John thought she was lovely to look at as she sat there, warming her hands and shielding her face from the flame with them at the same time. She looked at him and smiled pleasantly, but said nothing. She was still a little surprised to see him and wondered whether he himself had anything to say.

"Yes," said John, "it is very cold — traditional Christmas weather. Could not be finer, in fact, could it?"

"No — it could not be finer," echoed Mrs. Goddard, suppressing a smile. Then as though to help him out of his embarrassment by giving an impulse to the conversation, she added, "By the bye, Mr. Short, while we are warming ourselves why do not you let me hear one of your odes?"

She meant it kindly, thinking it would give him pleasure, as indeed it did. John's heart leaped and he blushed all over his face with delight. Mrs. Goddard was not quite sure whether she had done right, but she attributed his evident satisfaction to his vanity as a scholar.

"Certainly," he said with alacrity, "if you would like to hear it. Would you care to hear me repeat the Greek first?"

"Oh, of all things. I do not think I have ever heard Greek."

John cleared his throat and began, glancing at his hostess rather nervously from time to time. But his memory never failed him, and he went on to the end without a break or hesitation.

"How do you think it sounds?" he asked timidly when he had finished.

"It sounds very funny," said Mrs. Goddard. "I had no idea Greek sounded like that — but it has a pleasant rhythm."

"That is the thing," said John, enthusiastically. "I see you really appreciate it. Of course nobody knows how the ancients pronounced Greek, and if one pronounced it as the moderns do, it would sound all wrong — but the rhythm is the thing, you know. It is impossible to get over that."

Mrs. Goddard was not positively sure what he meant by "getting over the rhythm;" possibly John himself could not have defined his meaning very clearly. But his cheeks glowed and he was very much pleased.

"Yes, of course," said Mrs. Goddard confidently. "But what does it all mean, Mr. Short?"

"Would you really like to know?" asked John in fresh embarrassment. He suddenly realised how wonderfully delightful it was to be repeating his own poetry to the woman for whom it was written.

"Indeed yes — what is the use of your telling me all sorts of things in Greek, if you do not tell me what they mean?"

"Yes — you will promise not to be offended?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Goddard; then blushing a little she added, "it is quite — I mean — quite the sort of thing, is not it?"

"Oh quite," said John, blushing too, but looking grave for a moment. Then he repeated the English translation of the verses which, as they were certainly not so good as the original, may be omitted here. They set forth that in the vault of the world's night a new star had appeared which men had not yet named, nor would be likely to name until the power of human speech should be considerably increased, and the verses dwelt upon the theme, turning it and revolving it in several ways, finally declaring that the far-darting sun must look out for his interests unless he meant to be outshone by the new star. Translated into English there was nothing very remarkable about the performance though the original Greek ode was undoubtedly very good of its kind. But Mrs. Goddard was determined to be pleased.

"I think it is charming," she said, when John had reached the end and paused for her criticism.

"The Greek is very much better," said John doubtfully. "I cannot write English verses — they seem to me so much harder."

"I daresay," said Mrs. Goddard. "But did you really write that when — " she stopped not knowing exactly how to express herself. But John had his answer ready.

"Oh, I wrote ever so many," he said, "and I have got them all at Cambridge. But that is the only one I quite remember. I wrote them just after the day when I waked up Muggins — the only time I had seen you till now. I think I could — "

"How funny it seems," said Mrs. Goddard, "without knowing a person, to write verses to them! How did you manage to do it?"

"I was going to say that I think — I am quite sure — I could write much better things to you now."

"Oh, that is impossible — quite absurd, Mr. Short," said Mrs. Goddard, laughing more gaily than usual.

"Why?" asked John, somewhat emboldened by his success. "I do not see why, if one has an ideal, you know, one should not understand it much better when one comes near to it."

"Yes — but — how can I possibly be your ideal?" She felt herself so much older than John that she thought it was out of the question to be annoyed; so she treated him in a matter of fact way, and was really amused at his talk.

"I don't see why not," answered John stoutly. "You might be any man's ideal."

"Oh, really — " ejaculated Mrs. Goddard, somewhat startled at the force of the sweeping compliment. To be told point-blank, even by an enthusiastic youth of one and twenty, that one is the ideal woman, must be either very pleasant or very startling.

"Excuse me," she said quickly, before he could answer her, "you know of course I am very ignorant — yes I am — but will you please tell me what is an 'ideal'?"

"Why — yes," said John, "it is very easy. Ideal comes from idea. Plato meant, by the idea, the perfect model — well, do you see?"

"Not exactly," said Mrs. Goddard.

"It is very simple. When I, when anybody, says you are the ideal woman, it is meant that you are the perfect model, the archetype of a woman."

"Yes — but that is absurd," said his companion rather coldly.

"I am sorry that it should seem absurd," said John in a persuasive tone; "it seems very natural to me. A man thinks for a long time about everything that most attracts him and then, on a sudden, he sees it all before him, quite real and alive, and then he says he has realised his ideal. But you liked the verses, Mrs. Goddard?" he added quickly, hoping to bring back the smile that had vanished from her face. He had a strong impression that he had been a little too familiar. Probably Mrs. Goddard thought so too.

"Oh yes, I think they are very nice," she answered. But the smile did not come back. She was not displeased, but she was not pleased either; she was wondering how far this boy would go if she would let him. John, however, felt unpleasantly doubtful about what he had done.

"I hope you are not displeased," he said.

"Oh, not in the least," said she. "Shall we go to the park and skate?"

"I am not sure that I will skate to-day," said John, foolishly. Mrs. Goddard looked at him in unfeigned surprise.

"Why not? I thought it was for that — "

"Oh, of course," said John quickly. "Only it is not very amusing to skate when Mr. Juxon is pushing you about in a chair."

"Really — why should not he push me about, if I like it?"

"If you like it — that is different," answered John impatiently.

Mrs. Goddard began to think that John was very

like a spoiled child, and she resented his evident wish to monopolise her society. She left the room to get ready for the walk, vaguely wishing that he had not come.

"I have made a fool of myself again," said John to himself, when he was left alone; and he suddenly wished he could get out of the house without seeing her again. But before he had done wishing, she returned.

"Where is Miss Nellie?" he asked gloomily, as they walked down the path. "I hope she is coming too."

"She went up to the pond with Mr. Juxon, just before you came."

"Do you let her go about like that, without you?" asked John severely.

"Why not? Really, Mr. Short," said Mrs. Goddard, glancing up at his face, "either you dislike Mr. Juxon very much, or else I think you take a good deal upon yourself in remarking — in this way — "

She was naturally a little timid, but John's youth and what she considered as his extraordinary presumption inspired her with courage to protest. The effect upon John was instantaneous.

"Pray forgive me," he said humbly, "I am very silly. I daresay you are quite right and I do not like Mr. Juxon. Not that I have the smallest reason for not liking him," he continued quickly, "it is a mere personal antipathy, a mere idea, I daresay — very foolish of me."

"It is very foolish to take unreasonable dislikes to people one knows nothing about," she said quietly. "Will you please open the gate?" They were stand-

ing before the bars, but John was so much disturbed in mind that he stood still, quite forgetting to raise the long iron latch.

"Dear me — I beg your pardon — I cannot imagine what I was thinking of," he said, making the most idiotic excuse current in English idiom.

"Nor I," said Mrs. Goddard, with a little laugh, as he held the gate back for her to pass. It was a plain white gate with stone pillars, and there was no gatehouse. People who came to the Hall were expected to open it for themselves. Mrs. Goddard was so much amused at John's absence of mind that her good humour returned, and he felt that since that object was attained he no longer regretted his folly in the least. The cloud that had darkened the horizon of his romance had passed quickly away, and once more he said inwardly that he was enjoying the happiest days of his life. If for a moment the image of Mr. Juxon entered the field of his imaginative vision in the act of pushing Mrs. Goddard's chair upon the ice, he mentally ejaculated "bother the squire!" as he had done upon the previous night, and soon forgot all about him. The way through the park was long, the morning was delightful and Mrs. Goddard did not seem to be in a hurry.

"I wish the winter would last for ever," he said presently.

"So do I," answered his companion, "it is the pleasantest time of the year. One does not feel that nature is dead because one is sure she will very soon be alive again."

"That is a charming idea," said John, "one might make a good subject of it."

"It is a little old, perhaps. I think I have heard it before — have not you?"

"All good ideas are old. The older the better," said John confidently. Mrs. Goddard could not resist the temptation of teazing him a little. They had grown very intimate in forty-eight hours; it had taken six months for Mr. Juxon to reach the point John had won in two days.

"Are they?" she asked quietly. "Is that the reason you selected me for the 'idea' of your ode, which you explained to me?'

"You?" said John in astonishment. Then he laughed. "Why, you are not any older than I am!"

"Do you think so?" she inquired with a demure smile. "I am very much older than you think."

"You must be — I mean, you know, you must be older than you look."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Goddard, still smiling, and just resting the tips of her fingers upon his arm as she stepped across a slippery place in the frozen road. "Yes, I am a great deal older than you."

John would have liked very much to ask her age, but even to his youthful and unsophisticated mind such a question seemed almost too personal. He did not really believe that she was more than five years older than he, and that seemed to be no difference at all.

"I don't know," he said. "I am nearly one and twenty."

"Yes, I know," said Mrs. Goddard, who had heard every detail concerning John from Mr. Ambrose, again and again. "Just think," she added with a laugh, "only one and twenty! Why when I was one and twenty I was — " she stopped short.

"What were you doing then?" asked John, trying not to seem too curious.

"I was living in London," she said quietly. She half enjoyed his disappointment.

"Yes," he said, "I daresay. But what — well, I suppose I ought not to ask any questions."

"Certainly not," said she. "It is very rude to ask a lady questions about her age."

"I do not mean to be rude again," said John, pretending to laugh. "Have you always been fond of skating?" he asked, fixing his eye upon a distant tree, and trying to look unconscious.

"No — I only learned since I came here. Besides, I skate very badly."

"Did Mr. Juxon teach you?" asked John, still gazing into the distance. From not looking at the path he slipped on a frozen puddle and nearly fell. Whereat, as usual, when he did anything awkward, he blushed to the brim of his hat.

"Take care," said Mrs. Goddard, calmly. "You will fall if you don't look where you are going. No; Mr. Juxon was not here last year. He only came here in the summer."

"It seems to me that he has always been here," said John, trying to recover his equanimity. "Then I suppose Mr. Ambrose taught you to skate?"

"Exactly — Mr. Ambrose taught me. He skates very well."

"So will you, with a little more practice," answered her companion in a rather patronising tone. He intended perhaps to convey the idea that Mrs. Goddard would improve in the exercise if she would actually skate, and with him, instead of submitting to be pushed about in a chair by Mr. Juxon.

"Oh, I daresay," said Mrs. Goddard indifferently. "We shall soon be there, now. I can hear them on the ice."

"Too soon," said John with regret.

"I thought you liked skating so much."

"I like walking with you much better," he replied, and he glanced at her face to see if his speech produced any sign of sympathy.

"You have walked with me; now you can skate with Nellie," suggested Mrs. Goddard.

"You talk as though I were a child," said John, suddenly losing his temper in a very unaccountable way.

"Because I said you might skate with Nellie? Really, I don't see why. Mr. Juxon is not a child, and he has been skating with her all the morning."

"That is different," retorted John growing very red.

"Yes — Nellie is much nearer to your age than to Mr. Juxon's," answered Mrs. Goddard, with a calmness which made John desperate.

"Really, Mrs. Goddard," he said stiffly, "I cannot see what that has to do with it."

"'The atrocious crime of being a young man, which the lady so much older than myself has charged — ' How does the quotation end, Mr. Short?"

"'Has, with such spirit and decency, charged upon me, I shall neither attempt to palliate nor deny,'" said John savagely. "Quite so, Mrs. Goddard. I shall not attempt to palliate it, nor will I venture to deny it."

"Then why in the world are you so angry with me?" she asked, suddenly turning her violet eyes upon him. "I was only laughing, you know."

"Only laughing!" repeated John. "It is more pleasant to laugh than to be laughed at."

"Yes — would not you allow me the pleasure then, just for once?"

"Certainly, if you desire it. You are so extremely merry —"

"Come, Mr. Short, we must not seem to have been quarrelling when we reach the pond. It would be too ridiculous."

"Everything seems to strike you in a humorous light to-day," answered John, beginning to be pacified by her tone.

"Do you know, you are much more interesting when you are angry," said Mrs. Goddard.

"And you only made me angry in order to see whether I was interesting?"

"Perhaps — but then, I could not help it in the least."

"I trust you are thoroughly satisfied upon the point, Mrs. Goddard? If there is anything more that I can do to facilitate your researches in psychology —"

"You would help me? Even to the extent of being angry again?" She smiled so pleasantly and frankly that John's wrath vanished.

"It is impossible to be angry with you. I am very sorry if I seemed to be," he answered. "A man who has the good fortune to be thrown into your society is a fool to waste his time in being disagreeable."

"I agree with the conclusion, at all events — that is, it is much better to be agreeable. Is it not? Let us be friends."

"Oh, by all means," said John.

They walked on for some minutes in silence. John reflected that he had witnessed a phase of Mrs. Goddard's character of which he had been very far from suspecting the existence. He had not hitherto imagined her to be a woman of quick temper or sharp

speech. His idea of her was formed chiefly upon her appearance. Her sad face, with its pathetic expression, suggested a melancholy humour delighting in subdued and tranquil thoughts, inclined naturally to the romantic view, or to what in the eyes of youths of twenty appears to be the romantic view of life. He had suddenly found her answering him with a sharpness which, while it roused his wits, startled his sensibilities. But he was flattered as well. His instinct and his observation of Mrs. Goddard when in the society of others led him to believe that with Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose, or even with Mr. Juxon, she was not in the habit of talking as she talked with him. He was therefore inwardly pleased, so soon as his passing annoyance had subsided, to feel that she made a difference between him and others.

It was quite true that she made a distinction, though she did so almost unconsciously. It was perfectly natural, too. She was young in heart, in spite of her thirty years and her troubles; she had an elastic temperament; to a physiognomist her face would have shown a delicate sensitiveness to impressions rather than any inborn tendency to sadness. In spite of everything she was still young, and for two years and a half she had been in the society of persons much older than herself, persons she respected and regarded as friends, but persons in whom her youth found no sympathy. It was natural, therefore, that when time to some extent had healed the wound she had suffered and she suddenly found herself in the society of a young and enthusiastic man, something of the enforced soberness of her manner should unbend, showing her character in a new light. She herself enjoyed the change, hardly knowing why;

she enjoyed a little passage of arms with John, and it amused her more than she could have expected to be young again, to annoy him, to break the peace and heal it again in five minutes. But what happened entirely failed to amuse the squire, who did not regard such diversions as harmless; and moreover she was far from expecting the effect which her treatment of John Short produced upon his scholarly but enthusiastic temper.

CHAPTER IX.

THE squire had remarked that John Short seemed to have a peculiar temper, and Mrs. Goddard had observed the same thing. What has gone before sufficiently explains the change in John's manner, and the difference in his behaviour was plainly apparent even to Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose. The vicar indeed was wise enough to see that John was very much attracted by Mrs. Goddard, but he was also wise enough to say nothing about it. His wife, however, who had witnessed no love-making for nearly thirty years, except the courtship of the young physician who had married her daughter, attributed John's demeanour to no such disturbing cause. He was overworked, she said; he was therefore irritable; he had of course never taken that excellent homœopathic remedy, highly diluted aconite, since he had left the vicarage; the consequence was that he was subject to nervous headache —she only hoped he would not be taken ill on the eve of the examination for honours. She hoped, too, that he would prolong his holiday to the very last moment, for the country air and the rest he enjoyed were sure to do him so much good. With regard to the extension of John's visit, the vicar thought differently, although he held his peace. There were many reasons why John should not become attached to Mrs. Goddard both for her sake and his own, and if he staid long, the vicar felt quite sure that he would

fall in love with her. She was dangerously pretty, she was much older than John — which in the case of very young men constitutes an additional probability — she evidently took an innocent pleasure in his society, and altogether such a complication as was likely to ensue was highly undesirable. Therefore, when Mrs. Ambrose pressed John to stay longer than he had intended, the vicar not only gave him no encouragement, but spoke gravely of the near approach of the contest for honours, of the necessity of concentrating every force for the coming struggle, and expressed at the same time the firm conviction that, if John did his best, he ought to be the senior classic in the year.

Even Mrs. Goddard urged him to go. Of course he asked her advice. He would not have lost that opportunity of making her speak of himself, nor of gauging the exact extent of the interest he hoped she felt in him.

It was two or three days after the long conversation he had enjoyed with her. In that time they had met often and John's admiration for her, strengthened by his own romantic desire to be really in love, had begun to assume proportions which startled Mrs. Goddard and annoyed Mr. Juxon. The latter felt that the boy was in his way; whenever he wanted to see Mrs. Goddard, John was at her side, talking eagerly and contesting his position against the squire with a fierceness which in an older and wiser man would have been in the worst possible taste. Even as it was, Mr. Juxon looked considerably annoyed as he stood by, smoothing his smooth hair from time to time with his large white hand and feeling that even at his age, and with his experience, a man might sometimes cut a poor figure.

On the particular occasion when the relations between John and the squire became an object of comment to Mrs. Ambrose, the whole party were assembled at Mrs. Goddard's cottage. She had invited everybody to tea, a meal which in her little household represented a compromise between her appetite and Nellie's. She had felt that in the small festivities of the Billingsfield Christmas season she was called upon to do her share with the rest and, being a simple woman, she took her part simply, and did not dignify the entertainment of her four friends by calling it a dinner. The occasion was none the less hospitable, for she gave both time and thought to her preparations. Especially she had considered the question of precedence; it was doubtful, she thought, whether the squire or the vicar should sit upon her right hand. The squire, as being lord of the manor, represented the powers temporal, the vicar on the other hand represented the church, which on ordinary occasions takes precedence of the lay faculty. She had at last privately consulted Mr. Juxon, in whom she had the greatest confidence, asking him frankly which she should do, and Mr. Juxon had unhesitatingly yielded the post of honour to the vicar, adding to enforce his opinion the very plausible argument that if he, the squire, took Mrs. Goddard in to tea, the vicar would have to give his arm either to little Nellie or to his own wife. Mrs. Goddard was convinced and the affair was a complete success.

John felt that he could not complain of his position, but as he was separated from the object of his admiration during the whole meal, he resolved to indemnify himself for his sufferings by monopolising her conver-

sation during the rest of the evening. The squire on the other hand, who had been obliged to talk to Mrs. Ambrose during most of the time while they were at table, and who, moreover, was beginning to feel that he had seen almost enough of John Short, determined to give the young man a lesson in the art of interesting women in general and Mrs. Goddard in particular. She, indeed, would not have been a woman at all had she not understood the two men and their intentions. After tea the party congregated round the fire in the little drawing-room, standing in a circle, of which their hostess formed the centre. Mr. Juxon and John, anticipating that Mrs. Goddard must ultimately sit upon one side or other of the fireplace had at first chosen opposite sides, each hoping that she would take the chair nearest to himself. But Mrs. Goddard remained standing an unreasonably long time, for the very reason that she did not choose to sit beside either of them. Seeing this the squire, who had perhaps a greater experience than his adversary in this kind of strategic warfare, left his place and put himself on the same side as John. He argued that Mrs. Goddard would probably then choose the opposite side, whereas John who was younger would think she would come towards the two where they stood; John would consequently lose time, Mr. Juxon would cross again and instal himself by her side while his enemy was hesitating.

While these moves and counter-moves were proceeding, the conversation was general. The vicar was for the hundredth time admiring the Andrea del Sarto over the chimney-piece and his wife was explaining her general objections to the representation of sacred subjects upon canvas, while Mrs. Goddard answered

each in turn and endeavoured to disagree with neither. What the squire had foreseen when he made his last move, however, actually took place at last. Mrs. Goddard established herself upon the side opposite the two men. Mr. Juxon crossed rapidly to where she was seated, and Mrs. Ambrose, who had turned with the intention of speaking to the squire, found herself confronted by John. He saw that he had been worsted by his foe and immediately lost his temper; but being brought face to face with Mrs. Ambrose was obliged to control it as he might. That excellent lady beamed upon him with a maternal smile of the kind which is peculiarly irritating to young men. He struggled to get away however, glancing over Mrs. Ambrose's shoulder at the squire and longing to be "at him" as he would have expressed it. But the squire was not to be got at so easily, for the vicar's wife was of a fine presence and covered much ground. John involuntarily thought of the dyke before Troy, of Hector and his heroes attempting to storm it and of the Ajaces and Sarpedon defending it and glaring down from above. He could appreciate Hector's feelings — Mrs. Ambrose was very like the dyke.

The squire smiled serenely and smoothed his hair as he talked to Mrs. Goddard and she herself looked by no means discontented, thereby adding, as it were, an insult to the injury done to John.

"I shall always envy you the cottage," the squire was saying. "I have not a single room in the Hall that is half so cheery in the evening."

"I shall never forget my terror when we first met," answered Mrs. Goddard, "do you remember? You frightened me by saying you would like to live here. I thought you meant it."

"You must have thought I was the most unmannerly of barbarians."

"Instead of being the best of landlords," added Mrs. Goddard with a grateful smile.

"I hardly know whether I am that," said Mr. Juxon, settling himself in his chair. "But I believe I am by nature an exceedingly comfortable man, and I never fail to consult the interests of my comfort."

"And of mine. Think of all you have done to improve this place. I can never thank you enough. I suppose one always feels particularly grateful at Christmas time — does not one?"

"One has more to be grateful for, it seems to me — in our climate, too. People in southern countries never really know what comfort means, because nature never makes them thoroughly uncomfortable. Only a man who is freezing can appreciate a good fire."

"I suppose you have been a good deal in such places," suggested Mrs. Goddard, vaguely.

"Oh yes — everywhere," answered the squire with equal indefiniteness. "By the bye, talking of travelling, when is our young friend going away?" There was not a shade of ill-humour in the question.

"The day after New Year's — I believe."

"He has had a very pleasant visit."

"Yes," replied Mrs. Goddard, "I hope it will do him a great deal of good."

"Why? Was he ill? Ah — I remember, they said he had worked too hard. It is a great mistake to work too hard, especially when one is very young."

"He is very young, is not he?" remarked Mrs. Goddard with a faint smile, remembering the many conversations she had had with him.

"Very. Did it ever strike you that — well, that he was losing his head a little?"

"No," answered his companion innocently. "What about?"

"Oh, nothing. Only he has rather a peculiar temper. He is perpetually getting very angry with no ostensible reason — and then he glares at one like an angry cat."

"Take care," said Mrs. Goddard, "he might hear you."

"Do him good," said the squire cheerfully.

"Oh, no! It would hurt his feelings dreadfully. How can you be so unkind?"

"He is a very good boy, you know. Really, I believe he is. Only he is inclined to be rather too unreasonable; I should think he might be satisfied."

"Satisfied with what?" inquired Mrs. Goddard, who did not wish to understand.

"With the way you have treated him," returned the squire bluntly. "You have been wonderfully good to him."

"Have I?" The faint colour rose to her cheek. "I don't know — poor fellow! I daresay his life at Cambridge is very dull."

"Yes. Entirely devoid of that species of amusement which he has enjoyed so abundantly in Billingsfield. It is not every undergraduate who has a chance to talk to you for a week at a time."

Mr. Juxon made the remark very calmly, without seeming to be in the least annoyed. He was much too wise a man to appear to be displeased at Mrs. Goddard's treatment of John. Moreover, he felt that on the present occasion, at least, John had

been summarily worsted; it was his turn to be magnanimous.

"If you are going to make compliments, I will go away," said Mrs. Goddard.

"I? I never made a compliment in my life," replied the squire complacently. "Do you think it is a compliment to tell you that Mr. Short probably enjoys your conversation much more than the study of Greek roots?"

"Well — not exactly —"

"Besides, in general," continued the squire, "compliments are mere waste of breath. If a woman has any vanity she knows her own good points much better than any man who attempts to explain them to her; and if she has no vanity, no amount of explanation of her merits will make her see them in a proper light."

"That is very true," answered Mrs. Goddard, thoughtfully. "It never struck me before. I wonder whether that is the reason women always like men who never make any compliments at all?"

The squire's face assumed an amusing expression of inquiry and surprise.

"Is that personal?" he asked.

"Oh — of course not," answered Mrs. Goddard in some confusion. She blushed and turning towards the fire took up the poker and pretended to stir the coals. Women always delight in knocking a good fire to pieces, out of pure absence of mind. John Short saw the movement and, escaping suddenly from the maternal conversation of Mrs. Ambrose, threw himself upon his knee on the hearth-rug and tried to take the poker from his hostess's hand.

"Oh, Mrs. Goddard, don't! Let me do it — please!" he exclaimed.

"But I can do it very well myself," said she protesting and not relaxing her hold upon the poker. But John was obstinate in his determination to save her trouble, and rudely tried to get the instrument away.

"Please don't — you hurt me," said Mrs. Goddard petulantly.

"Oh — I beg your pardon — I wanted to help you," said John leaving his hold. "I did not really hurt you — did I?" he asked, almost tenderly.

"Dreadfully," replied Mrs. Goddard, half angry and half amused at his impatience and subsequent contrition. The squire sat complacently in his chair, watching the little scene. John hated him more than ever, and grew very red. Mrs. Goddard saw the boy's embarrassment and presently relented.

"I daresay you will do it better than I," she said, handing him the poker, which John seized with alacrity. "That big coal — there," she added, pointing to a smouldering block in the corner of the grate.

"I did not mean to be rude," said John. "I only wanted to help you." He knelt by her side poking the fire industriously. "I only wanted to get a chance to talk to you," he added, in a low voice, barely audible to Mrs. Goddard as she leaned forward.

"I am afraid you cannot do that just now," she said, not unkindly, but with the least shade of severity in her tone. "You will get dreadfully hot if you stay there, so near the fire."

"I don't mind the heat in the least," said John heroically. Nevertheless as she did not give him any further encouragement he was presently obliged to retire, greatly discomfited. He could not spend the evening on his knees with the poker in his hand.

"Bad failure," remarked the squire in an undertone as soon as John had rejoined Mrs. Ambrose, who had not quite finished her lecture on homœopathy.

Mrs. Goddard leaned back in her chair and looked at Mr. Juxon rather coolly. She did not want him to laugh at John, though she was not willing to encourage John herself.

"You should not be unkind," she said. "He is such a nice boy — why should you wish him to be uncomfortable?"

"Oh, I don't in the least. I could not help being amused a little. I am sure I don't want to be unkind."

Indeed the squire had not shown himself to be so, on the whole, and he did not refer to the matter again during the evening. He kept his place for some time by Mrs. Goddard's side and then, judging that he had sufficiently asserted his superiority, rose and talked to Mrs. Ambrose. But John, being now in a thoroughly bad humour, could not take his vacant seat with a good grace. He stood aloof and took up a book that lay upon the table and avoided looking at Mrs. Goddard. By and by, when the party broke up, he said good-night in such a particularly cold and formal tone of voice that she stared at him in surprise. But he took no notice of her look and went away after the Ambroses, in that state of mind which boys call a huff.

But on the following day John repented of his behaviour. All day long he wandered about the garden of the vicarage, excusing himself from joining the daily skating which formed the staple of amusement during the Christmas week, by saying that he had an idea for a copy of verses and must needs work

it out. But he inwardly hoped that Mrs. Goddard would come to the vicarage late in the afternoon, without the inevitable Mr. Juxon, and that he might then get a chance of talking to her. He was not quite sure what he should say. He would find words on the spur of the moment; it would at all events be much easier than to meet her on the ice at the Hall with all the rest of them and to see Mr. Juxon pushing her about in that detestable chair, with the unruffled air of superiority which John so hated to see upon his face. The vicar suspected more than ever that there was something wrong; he had seen some of the by-play on the previous evening, and had noticed John's ill-concealed disappointment at being unable to dislodge the sturdy squire from his seat. But Mrs. Ambrose seemed to be very obtuse, and the vicar would have been the last to have spoken of his suspicions, even to the wife of his bosom. It was his duty to induce John to go back to his work at the end of the week; it was not his duty to put imputations upon him which Mrs. Ambrose would naturally exaggerate and which would drive her excellent heart into a terrible state of nervous anxiety.

But Mrs. Goddard did not come back to the vicarage on that day, and John went to dinner with a sad heart. It did not seem like a day at all if he had not seen her and talked with her. He had now no doubt whatever that he was seriously in love, and he set himself to consider his position. The more he considered it, the more irreconcilable it seemed to be with the passion which beset him. A child could see that for several years, at least, he would not be in a position to marry. With Mr. Juxon at hand from year's end to year's end, the owner of the Hall, of the Billingsfield prop-

erty and according to all appearances of other resources besides, — with such a man constantly devoted to her, could Mrs. Goddard be expected to wait for poor John three years, even two years, from the time of the examination for the classical Tripos? Nothing was more improbable, he was forced to admit. And yet, the idea of life if he did not marry Mrs. Goddard was dismal beyond all expression; he would probably not survive it. He did not know what he should do. He shrank from the thought of declaring his love to her at once. He remembered with pain that she had a terrible way of laughing at him when he grew confidential or too complimentary, and he dreaded lest at the supreme moment of his life he should appear ridiculous in her eyes — he, a mere undergraduate. If he came out at the head of the Tripos it would be different; and yet that seemed so long to wait, especially while Mr. Juxon lived at the Hall and Mrs. Goddard lived at the park gates. Suddenly a thought struck him which filled him with delight; it was just possible that Mr. Juxon had no intention of marrying Mrs. Goddard. If he had any such views he would probably have declared them before now, for he had met her every day during more than half a year. John longed to ask some one the question. Perhaps Mr. Ambrose, who might be supposed to know everything connected with Mrs. Goddard, could tell him. He felt very nervous at the idea of speaking to the vicar on the subject, and yet it seemed to him that no one else could set his mind at rest. If he were quite certain that Mr. Juxon had no intention of offering himself to the charming tenant of the cottage, he might return to his work with some sense of security in the future. Otherwise he saw only the des-

perate alternative of throwing himself at her feet and declaring that he loved her, or of going back to Cambridge with the dreadful anticipation of hearing any day that she had married the squire. To be laughed at would be bad, but to feel that he had lost her irrevocably, without a struggle, would be awful. No one but the vicar could and would tell him the truth; it would be bitter to ask such a question, but it must be done. Having at last come to this formidable resolution, towards the conclusion of dinner, his spirits rose a little. He took another glass of the vicar's mild ale and felt that he could face his fate.

"May I speak to you a moment in the study, Mr. Ambrose?" he said as they rose from table.

"Certainly," replied the vicar; and having conducted his wife to the drawing-room, he returned to find John. There was a low, smouldering fire in the study grate, and John had lit a solitary candle. The room looked very dark and dismal and John was seated in one of the black leather chairs, waiting.

"Anything about those verses you were speaking of to-day?" asked the vicar cheerfully, in anticipation of a pleasant classical chat.

"No," said John, gloomily. "The fact is—" he cleared his throat, "the fact is, I want to ask you rather a delicate question, sir."

The vicar's heavy eyebrows contracted; the lines of his face all turned downwards, and his long, clean-shaved upper lip closed sharply upon its fellow, like a steel trap. He turned his grey eyes upon John's averted face with a searching look.

"Have you got into any trouble at Trinity, John?" he asked severely.

"Oh no — no indeed," said John. Nothing was further from his thoughts than his college at that moment. "I want to ask you a question, which no one else can answer. Is — do you think that — that Mr. Juxon has any idea of marrying Mrs. Goddard?"

The vicar started in astonishment and laid both hands upon the arms of his chair.

"What — in the world — put that — into your head?" he asked very slowly, emphasising every word of his question. John was prepared to see his old tutor astonished but was rather taken aback at the vicar's tone.

"Do you think it is likely, sir?" he insisted.

"Certainly not," answered the vicar, still eyeing him suspiciously. "Certainly not. I have positive reasons to prove the contrary. But, my dear John, why, in the name of all that is sensible, do you ask me such a question? You don't seriously think of proposing —"

"I don't see why I should not," said John doggedly, seeing that he was found out.

"You don't see why you should not? Why the thing is perfectly absurd, not to say utterly impossible! John, you are certainly mad."

"I don't see why," repeated John. "I am a grown man. I have good prospects —"

"Good prospects!" ejaculated the vicar in horror. "Good prospects! Why, you are only an undergraduate at Cambridge."

"I may be senior classic in a few months," objected John. "That is not such a bad prospect, it seems to me."

"It means that you may get a fellowship, probably will — in the course of a few years. But you lose it

if you marry. Besides — do you know that Mrs. Goddard is ten years older than you, and more?"

"Impossible," said John in a tone of conviction.

"I know that she is. She will be two and thirty on her next birthday, and you are not yet one and twenty."

"I shall be next month," argued John, who was somewhat taken aback, however, by the alarming news of Mrs. Goddard's age. "Besides, I can go into the church, before I get a fellowship — "

"No, you can't," said the vicar energetically. "You won't be able to manage it. If you do, you will have to put up with a poor living."

"That would not matter. Mrs. Goddard has something — "

"An honourable prospect!" exclaimed Mr. Ambrose, growing more and more excited. "To marry a woman ten years older than yourself because she has a little money of her own! You! I would not have thought it of you, John — indeed I would not!"

Indeed no one was more surprised than John Short himself, when he found himself arguing the possibilities of his marriage with his old tutor. But he was an obstinate young fellow enough and was not inclined to give up the fight easily.

"Really," he objected, "I cannot see anything so very terrible in the idea. I shall certainly make my way in the world. You know that it is not for the sake of her money. Many men have married women ten years older than themselves, and not half so beautiful and charming, I am sure."

"I don't believe it," said the vicar, "and if they have, why it has been very different, that is all. Besides, you have not known Mrs. Goddard a week —

positively not more than five days — why, it is madness! Do you mean to tell me that at the end of five days you believe you are seriously attached to a lady you never saw in your life before?"

"I saw her once," said John. "That day when I waked Muggins —"

"Once! Nearly three years ago! I have no patience with you, John! That a young fellow of your capabilities should give way to such a boyish fancy! It is absolutely amazing! I thought you were growing to like her society very much, but I did not believe it would come to this!"

"It is nothing to be ashamed of," said John stoutly.

"It is something to be afraid of," answered the vicar.

"Oh, do not be alarmed," retorted John. "I will do nothing rash. You have set my mind at rest in assuring me that she will not marry Mr. Juxon. I shall not think of offering myself to Mrs. Goddard until after the Tripos."

"Offering myself" — how deliciously important the expression sounded to John's own ears! It conveyed such a delightful sense of the possibilities of life when at last he should feel that he was in a position to offer himself to any woman, especially to Mrs. Goddard.

"I have a great mind not to ask you to come down, even if you do turn out senior classic," said the vicar, still fuming with excitement. "But if you put off your rash action until then, you will probably have changed your mind."

"I will never change my mind," said John confidently. It was evident, nevertheless, that if the romance of his life were left to the tender mercies

of the Reverend Augustin Ambrose, it was likely to come to an abrupt termination. When the two returned to the society of Mrs. Ambrose, the vicar was still very much agitated and John was plunged in a gloomy melancholy.

CHAPTER X.

THE vicar's suspicions were more than realised and he passed an uncomfortable day after his interview with John, in debating what he ought to do, whether he ought to do anything at all, or whether he should merely hasten his old pupil's departure and leave matters to take care of themselves. He was a very conscientious man, and he felt that he was responsible for John's conduct towards Mrs. Goddard, seeing that she had put herself under his protection, and that John was almost like one of his family. His first impulse was to ask counsel of his wife, but he rejected the plan, reflecting with great justice that she was very fond of John and had at first not been sure of liking Mrs. Goddard; she would be capable of thinking that the latter had "led Short on," as she would probably say. The vicar did not believe this, and was therefore loath that any one else should. He felt that circumstances had made him Mrs. Goddard's protector, and he was moreover personally attached to her; he would not therefore do or say anything whereby she was likely to appear to any one else in an unfavourable light. It was incredible that she should have given John any real encouragement. Mr. Ambrose wondered whether he ought to warn her of his pupil's madness. But when he thought about that, it seemed unnecessary. It was unlikely that John would

betray himself during his present visit, since the vicar had solemnly assured him that there was no possibility of a marriage so far as Mr. Juxon was concerned. It was undoubtedly a very uncomfortable situation but there was evidently nothing to be done; Mr. Ambrose felt that to speak to Mrs. Goddard would be to precipitate matters in a way which could not but cause much humiliation to John Short and much annoyance to herself. He accordingly held his peace, but his upper lip set itself stiffly and his eyes had a combative expression which told his wife that there was something the matter.

After breakfast John went out, on pretence of walking in the garden, and Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose were left alone. The latter, as usual after the morning meal, busied herself about the room, searching out those secret corners which she suspected Susan of having forgotten to dust. The vicar stood looking out of the window. The weather was grey and it seemed likely that there would be a thaw which would spoil the skating.

"I think," said Mrs. Ambrose, "that John is far from well."

"What makes you say that?" inquired the vicar, who was thinking of him at that very moment.

"Anybody might see it. He has no appetite — he ate nothing at breakfast this morning. He looks pale. My dear, that boy will certainly break down."

"I don't believe it," answered Mr. Ambrose still looking out of the window. His hands were in his pockets, thrusting the skirts of his clerical coat to right and left; he slowly raised himself upon his

toes and let himself down again, repeating the operation as though it helped him to think.

"That is the way you spoil all your coats, Augustin," said his wife looking at him from behind. "I assure you, my dear, that boy is not well. Poor fellow, all alone at college with nobody to look after him —"

"We have all had to go through that. I do not think it hurts him a bit," said the vicar, slowly removing his hands from his pockets in deference to his wife's suggestion.

"Then what is it, I would like to know? There is certainly something the matter. Now I ask you whether he looks like himself?"

"Perhaps he does look a little tired."

"Tired! There is something on his mind, Augustin. I am positively certain there is something on his mind. Why won't you tell me?"

"My dear —" began the vicar, and then stopped short. He was a very truthful man, and as he knew very well what was the matter with John he was embarrassed to find an answer. "My dear," he repeated, "I do not think he is ill."

"Then I am right," retorted Mrs. Ambrose, triumphantly. "It is just as I thought, there is something on his mind. Don't deny it, Augustin; there is something on his mind."

Mr. Ambrose was silent; he glared fiercely at the window panes.

"Why don't you tell me?" insisted his better half. "I am quite sure you know all about it. Augustin, do you know, or do you not?"

Thus directly questioned the vicar turned sharply round, sweeping the window with his coat tails.

"My dear," he said, shortly, "I do know. Can you not imagine that it may be a matter which John does not care to have mentioned?"

Mrs. Ambrose grew red with annoyance. She had set her heart on finding out what had disturbed John, and the vicar had apparently made up his mind that she should not succeed. Such occurrences were very rare between that happy couple.

"I cannot believe he has done anything wrong," said Mrs. Ambrose. "Anything which need be concealed from me — the interest I have always taken — "

"He has not done anything wrong," said the vicar impatiently. "I do wish you would drop the subject — "

"Then why should it be concealed from me?" objected his wife with admirable logic. "If it is anything good he need not hide his light under a bushel, I should think."

"There are plenty of things which are neither bad nor good," argued the vicar, who felt that if he could draw Mrs. Ambrose into a Socratic discussion he was safe.

"That is a distinct prevarication, Augustin," said she severely. "I am surprised at you."

"Not at all," retorted the vicar. "What has occurred to John is not owing to any fault of his." In his own mind the good man excused himself by saying that John could not have helped falling in love with Mrs. Goddard. But his wife turned quickly upon him.

"That does not prevent what has occurred to him, as you call it, from being good, or more likely bad, to judge from his looks."

"My dear," said Mr. Ambrose, driven to bay, "I entirely decline to discuss the point."

"I thought you trusted me, Augustin."

"So I do — certainly — and I always consult you about my own affairs."

"I think I have as much right to know about John as you have," retorted his wife, who seemed deeply hurt.

"That is a point then which you ought to settle with John," said the vicar. "I cannot betray his confidence, even to you."

"Oh — then he has been making confidences to you?"

"How in the world should I know about his affairs unless he told me?"

"One may see a great many things without being told about them, you know," answered Mrs. Ambrose, assuming a prim expression as she examined a small spot in the tablecloth. The vicar was walking up and down the room. Her speech, which was made quite at random, startled him. She, too, might easily have observed John's manner when he was with Mrs. Goddard; she might have guessed the secret, and have put her own interpretation on John's sudden melancholy.

"What may one see?" asked the vicar quickly.

"I did not say one could see anything," answered his wife. "But from your manner I infer that there really is something to see. Wait a minute — what can it be?"

"Nothing — my dear, nothing," said the vicar desperately.

"Oh, Augustin, I know you so well," said the implacable Mrs. Ambrose. "I am quite sure now, that it is something I have seen. Deny it, my dear."

The vicar was silent and bit his long upper lip as he marched up and down the room.

"Of course — you cannot deny it," she continued. "It is perfectly clear. The very first day he arrived — when you came down from the Hall, in the evening — Augustin, I have got it! It is Mrs. Goddard — now don't tell me it is not. I am quite sure it is Mrs. Goddard. How stupid of me! Is it not Mrs. Goddard?"

"If you are so positive," said the vicar, resorting to a form of defence generally learned in the nursery, "why do you ask me?"

"I insist upon knowing, Augustin, is it, or is it not, Mrs. Goddard?"

"My dear, I positively refuse to answer any more questions," said the vicar with tardy firmness.

"Oh, it is no matter," retorted Mrs. Ambrose in complete triumph, "if it were not Mrs. Goddard of course you would say so at once."

A form of argument so unanswerable, that the vicar hastily left the room feeling that he had basely betrayed John's confidence, and muttering something about intolerable curiosity. Mrs. Ambrose had vanquished her husband, as she usually did on those rare occasions when anything approaching to a dispute arose between them. Having come to the conclusion that "it" was Mrs. Goddard, the remainder of the secret needed no discovery. It was plain that John must be in love with the tenant of the cottage, and it seemed likely that it would devolve upon Mrs. Ambrose to clear up the matter. She was very fond of John and her first impression was that Mrs. Goddard, whom she now again suspected of having foreign blood, had "led him on" — an impression which the vicar had antici-

pated when he rashly resolved not to tell his wife John's secret. She knew very well that the vicar must have told John his mind in regard to such an attachment, and she easily concluded that he must have done so on the previous evening when John called him into the study. But she had just won a victory over her husband, and she consequently felt that he was weak, probably too weak to save the situation, and it was borne in upon her that she ought to do something immediately. Unhappily she did not see quite clearly what was to be done. She might go straight to Mrs. Goddard and accuse her of having engaged John's affections; but the more she thought of that, the more diffident she grew in regard to the result of such an interview. Curiosity had led her to a certain point, but caution prevented her from going any further. Mrs. Ambrose was very cautious. The habit of living in a small place, feeling that all her actions were watched by the villagers and duly commented upon by them, had made her even more careful than she was by nature. It would be very unwise to bring about a scene with Mrs. Goddard unless she were very sure of the result. Mrs. Goddard was hardly a friend. In Mrs. Ambrose's opinion an acquaintance of two years and a half standing involving almost daily meetings and the constant exchange of civilities did not constitute friendship. Nevertheless the vicar's wife would have been ashamed to own that after such long continued intercourse she was wholly ignorant of Mrs. Goddard's real character; especially as the latter had requested the vicar to tell Mrs. Ambrose her story when she first appeared at Billingsfield. Moreover, as her excitement at the victory she had gained over her husband began to

subside, she found herself reviewing mentally the events of the last few days. She remembered distinctly that John had perpetually pursued Mrs. Goddard, and that although the latter seemed to find him agreeable enough, she had never to Mrs. Ambrose's knowledge given him any of those open encouragements in the way of smiles and signals, which in the good lady's mind were classified under the term "flirting." Mrs. Ambrose's ideas of flirtation may have been antiquated; thirty years of Billingsfield in the society of the Reverend Augustin had not contributed to their extension; but, on the whole, they were just. Mrs. Goddard had not flirted with John. It is worthy of notice that in proportion as the difficulties she would enter upon by demanding an explanation from Mrs. Goddard seemed to grow in magnitude, she gradually arrived at the conclusion that it was John's fault. Half an hour ago, in the flush of triumph she had indignantly denied that anything could be John's fault. She now resolved to behave to him with great austerity. Such an occurrence as his falling in love could not be passed over with indifference. It seemed best that he should leave Billingsfield very soon.

John thought so too. Existence would not be pleasant now that the vicar knew his secret, and he cursed the folly and curiosity which had led him to betray himself in order to find out whether Mr. Juxon thought of marrying Mrs. Goddard. He had now resolved to return to Cambridge at once and to work his hardest until the Tripos was over. He would then come back to Billingsfield and, with his honours fresh upon him and the prospect of immediate success before him, he would throw himself at Mrs. Goddard's

feet. But of course he must have one farewell interview. Oh, those farewell interviews! Those leave-takings, wherein often so much is taken without leave!

Accordingly at luncheon he solemnly announced his intention of leaving the vicarage on the morrow. Mrs. Ambrose received the news with an equanimity which made John suspicious, for she had heretofore constantly pressed him to extend his holiday, expressing the greatest solicitude for his health. She now sat stony as a statue and said very coldly that she was sorry he had to go so soon, but that, of course, it could not be helped. The vicar was moved by his wife's apparent indifference. John, he said, might at least have stayed till the end of the promised week; but at this suggestion Mrs. Ambrose darted at her husband a look so full of fierce meaning, that the vicar relapsed into silence, returning to the consideration of bread and cheese and a salad of mustard and cress. John saw the look and was puzzled; he did not believe the vicar capable of going straight to Mrs. Ambrose with the story of the last night's interview. But he was already so much disturbed that he did not attempt to explain to himself what was happening.

But when lunch was over, and he realised that he had declared his intention of leaving Billingsfield on the next day, he saw that if he meant to see Mrs. Goddard before he left he must go to her at once. He therefore waited until he heard Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose talking together in the sitting-room and then slipped quietly out by the garden to the road.

He had no idea what he should say when he met Mrs. Goddard. He meant, of course, to let her under-

stand, or at least suppose, that he was leaving suddenly on her account, but he did not know in the least how to accomplish it. He trusted that the words necessary to him would come into his head spontaneously. His heart beat fast and he was conscious that he blushed as he rang the bell of the cottage. Almost before he knew where he was, he found himself ushered into the little drawing-room and in the presence of the woman he now felt sure that he loved. But to his great annoyance she was not alone; Nellie was with her. Mrs. Goddard sat near the fire, reading a review; Nellie was curled up in a corner of the deep sofa with a book, her thick brown curls falling all over her face and hands as she read. Mrs. Goddard extended her hand, without rising.

"How do you do, Mr. Short?" she said. The young man stood hat in hand in the middle of the room, feeling very nervous. It was strange that he should experience any embarrassment now, considering how many hours he had spent in her company during the last few days. He blushed and stammered.

"How do you do? I, in fact — I have come to say good-bye," he blurted out.

"So soon?" said Mrs. Goddard calmly. "Pray sit down."

"Are you really going away, Mr. Short?" asked Nellie. "We are so sorry to lose you." The child had caught the phrase from a book she had been reading, and thought it very appropriate. Her mother smiled.

"Yes — as Nellie says — we are sorry to lose you," she said. "I thought you were to stay until Monday?"

"So I was — but — very urgent business — not exactly business of course, but work — calls me away sooner." Having delivered himself of this masterpiece of explanation John looked nervously at Nellie and then at his hat and then, with an imploring glance, at Mrs. Goddard.

"But we shall hear of you, Mr. Short — after the examinations, shall we not?"

"Oh yes," said John eagerly. "I will come down as soon as the lists are out."

"You have my best wishes, you know," said Mrs. Goddard kindly. "I feel quite sure that you will really be senior classic."

"Mamma is always saying that — it is quite true," explained Nellie.

John blushed again and looked gratefully at Mrs. Goddard. He wished Nellie would go away, but there was not the least chance of that.

"Yes," said Mrs. Goddard, "I often say it. We all take a great interest in your success here."

"You are very kind," murmured John. "Of course I shall come down at once and tell you all about it, if I succeed. I do not really expect to be first, of course. I shall be satisfied if I get a place in the first ten. But I mean to do my best."

"No one can do more," said Mrs. Goddard, leaning back in her chair and looking into the fire. Her face was quiet, but not sad as it sometimes was. There was a long silence which John did not know how to break. Nellie sat upon a carved chair by the side of the fireplace dangling her legs and looking at her toes, turning them alternately in and out. She wished John would go for she wanted to get back to her book, but had been told it was not good manners to read when

there were visitors. John looked at Mrs. Goddard's face and was about to speak, and then changed his mind and grew red and said nothing. Had she noticed his shyness she would have made an effort at conversation, but she was absent-minded to-day, and was thinking of something else. Suddenly she started and laughed a little.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "What were you saying, Mr. Short?" Had John been saying anything he would have repeated it, but being thus interrogated he grew doubly embarrassed.

"I — I have not much to say — except good-bye," he answered.

"Oh, don't go yet," said Mrs. Goddard. "You are not going this afternoon? It is always so unpleasant to say good-bye, is it not?"

"Dreadfully," answered John. "I would rather say anything else in the world. No; I am going early to-morrow morning. There is no help for it," he added desperately. "I must go, you know."

"The next time you come, you will be able to stay much longer," said Mrs. Goddard in an encouraging way. "You will have no more terms, then."

"No indeed — nothing but to take my degree."

"And what will you do then? You said the other day that you thought seriously of going into the church."

"Oh mamma," interrupted Nellie suddenly looking up, "fancy Mr. Short in a black gown, preaching like Mr. Ambrose! How perfectly ridiculous he would look!"

"Nellie — Nellie!" exclaimed Mrs. Goddard, "do not talk nonsense. It is very rude to say Mr. Short would look ridiculous."

"I didn't mean to be rude, mamma," returned Nellie, blushing scarlet and pouting her lips, "only it would be very funny, wouldn't it?"

"I daresay it would," said John, relieved by the interruption. "I wish you would advise me what to do, Mrs. Goddard," he added in a confidential tone.

"I?" she exclaimed, and then laughed. "How should I be able to advise you?"

"I am sure you could," said John, insisting. "You have such wonderfully good judgment—"

"Have I? I did not know it. But, tell me, if you come out very high are you not sure of getting a fellowship?"

"It is likely," answered John indifferently. "But I should have to give it up if I married—"

"Surely, Mr. Short," cried Mrs. Goddard, with a laugh that cut him to the quick, "you do not think of marrying for many years to come?"

"Oh—I don't know," he said, blushing violently, "why should not I?"

"In the first place, a man should never marry until he is at least five and twenty years old," said Mrs. Goddard, calmly.

"Well—I may be as old as that before I get the fellowship."

"Yes, I daresay. But even then, why should you want to resign a handsome independence as soon as you have got it? Is there anything else so good within your reach?"

"There is the church, of course," said John. "But Miss Nellie seems to think that ridiculous—"

"Never mind Nellie," answered Mrs. Goddard. "Seriously, Mr. Short, do you approve of entering

the church merely as a profession, a means of earning money?"

"Well — no — I did not put it in that way. But many people do."

"That does not prove that it is either wise or decent," said Mrs. Goddard. "If you felt impelled to take orders from other motives, it would be different. As I understand you, you are choosing a profession for the sake of becoming independent."

"Certainly," said John.

"Well, then, there is nothing better for you to do than to get a fellowship and hold it as long as you can, and during that time you can make up your mind." She spoke with conviction, and the plan seemed good. "But I cannot imagine," she continued, "why you should ask my advice."

"And not to marry?" inquired John nervously.

"There is plenty of time to think of that when you are thirty — even five and thirty is not too late."

"Dear me!" exclaimed John, "I think that is much too old!"

"Do you call me old?" asked Mrs. Goddard serenely. "I was thirty-one on my last birthday."

For the twentieth time, John felt himself growing uncomfortably hot. Not only had he said an unconscionably stupid thing, but Mrs. Goddard, after advising him not to marry for ten years, had almost hinted that she might meanwhile be married herself. What else could she mean by the remark? But John was hardly a responsible being on that day. His views of life and his understanding were equally disturbed.

"No indeed," he protested on hearing her confession of age. "No indeed — why, you are the youngest

person I ever saw, of course. But with men — it is quite different."

"Is it? I always thought women were supposed to grow old faster than men. That is the reason why women always marry men so much older than themselves."

"Oh — in that case — I have nothing more to say," replied John in very indistinct tones. The perspiration was standing upon his forehead; the room swam with him and he felt a terrible, prickly sensation all over his body.

"Mamma, shan't I open the door? Mr. Short is so very hot," said Nellie looking at him in some astonishment. At that moment John felt as though he could have eaten little Nellie, long legs, ringlets and all, with infinite satisfaction. He rose suddenly to his feet.

"The fact is — it is late — I must really be saying good-bye," he stammered.

"Must you?" said Mrs. Goddard, suspecting that something was the matter. "Well, I am very sorry to say good-bye. But you will be coming back soon, will you not?"

"Yes — I don't know — perhaps I shall not come back at all. Good-bye — Mrs. Goddard — good-bye, Miss Nellie."

"Good-bye, Mr. Short," said Mrs. Goddard, looking at him with some anxiety. "You are not ill? What is the matter?"

"Oh dear no, nothing," answered John with an unnatural laugh. "No thank you — good-bye."

He managed to get out of the door and rushed down to the road. The cold air steadied his nerves. He felt better. With a sudden revulsion of feeling,

he began to utter inward imprecations against his folly, against the house he had just left, against everybody and everything in general, not forgetting poor little Nellie.

"If ever I cross that threshold again —" he muttered with tragic emphasis. His face was still red, and he swung his stick ferociously as he strode towards the vicarage. Several little boys in ragged smock-frocks saw him and thought he had had some beer, even as their own fathers, and made vulgar gestures when his back was turned.

So poor John packed his portmanteau and left the vicarage early on the following morning. He sent an excuse to Mr. Juxon explaining that the urgency of his work called him back sooner than he had expected, and when the train moved fairly off towards Cambridge he felt that in being spared the ordeal of shaking hands with his rival he had at least escaped some of the bitterness of his fate; as he rolled along he thought very sadly of all that had happened in that short time which was to have been so gay and which had come to such a miserable end.

Reflecting calmly upon his last interview with Mrs. Goddard, he was surprised to find that his memory failed him. He could not recall anything which could satisfactorily account for the terrible disappointment and distress he had felt. She had only said that she was thirty-one years old, precisely as the vicar had stated on the previous evening, and she had advised him not to marry for some years to come. But she had laughed, and his feelings had been deeply wounded — he could not tell precisely at what point in the conversation, but he was quite certain that she had laughed, and oh! that terrible Nellie! It was very

bitter, and John felt that the best part of his life was lived out. He went back to his books with a dark and melancholy tenacity of purpose, flavoured by a hope that he might come to some sudden and awful end in the course of the next fortnight, thereby causing untold grief and consternation to the hard-hearted woman he had loved. But before the fortnight had expired he found to his surprise that he was intensely interested in his work, and once or twice he caught himself wondering how Mrs. Goddard would look when he went back to Billingsfield and told her he had come out at the head of the classical Tripos — though, of course, he had no intention of going there, nor of ever seeing her again.

CHAPTER XI.

Mr. Juxon was relieved to hear that John Short had suddenly gone back to Cambridge. He had indeed meant to like him from the first and had behaved towards him with kindness and hospitality; but while ready to admire his good qualities and to take a proper amount of interest in his approaching contest for honours, he had found him a troublesome person to deal with and, in his own words, a nuisance. Matters had come to a climax after the tea at the cottage, when the squire had so completely vanquished him, but since that evening the two had not met.

The opposition which John brought to bear against Mr. Juxon was not, however, without its effect. The squire was in that state of mind in which a little additional pressure sufficed to sway his resolutions. It has been seen that he had for some time regarded Mrs. Goddard's society as an indispensable element in his daily life; he had been so much astonished at discovering this that he had absented himself for several days and had finally returned ready to submit to his fate, in so far as his fate required that he should see Mrs. Goddard every day. Shortly afterwards John had appeared and by his persistent attempts to monopolise Mrs. Goddard's conversation had again caused an interruption in the squire's habits, which the latter had resented with characteristic firmness. The very fact of having resisted John had

strengthened and given a new tone to Mr. Juxon's feelings towards his tenant. He began to watch the hands of the clock with more impatience than formerly when, after breakfast, he sat reading the papers before the library fire, waiting for the hour when he was accustomed to go down to the cottage. His interest in the papers decreased as his interest in the time of day grew stronger, and for the first time in his life he found to his great surprise that after reading the news of the day with the greatest care, he was often quite unable to remember a word of what he had read. Then, at first, he would be angry with himself and would impose upon himself the task of reading the paper again before going to the cottage. But very soon he found that he had to read it twice almost every day, and this seemed such an unreasonable waste of time that he gave it up, and fell into very unsystematic habits.

For some days, as though by mutual consent, neither Mrs. Goddard nor the squire spoke of John Short. The squire was glad he was gone and hoped that he would not come back, but was too kind-hearted to say so; Mrs. Goddard instinctively understood Mr. Juxon's state of mind and did not disturb his equanimity by broaching an unpleasant subject. Several days passed by after John had gone and he would certainly not have been flattered had he known that during that time two, out of the four persons he had met so often in his short holiday, had never so much as mentioned him.

One afternoon in January the squire found himself alone with Mrs. Goddard. It was a great exception, and she herself doubted whether she were wise to receive him when she had not Nellie with her. Nellie

had gone to the vicarage to help Mrs. Ambrose with some work she had in hand for her poor people, but Mrs. Goddard had a slight headache and had stayed at home in consequence. The weather was very bad; heavy clouds were driving overhead and the north-east wind howled and screamed through the leafless oaks of the park, driving a fine sleet against the cottage windows and making the dead creepers rattle against the wall. It was a bitter January day, and Mrs. Goddard felt how pleasant a thing it was to stay at home with a book beside her blazing fire. She was all alone, and Nellie would not be back before four o'clock. Suddenly a well-known step echoed upon the slate flags without and there was a ring at the bell. Mrs. Goddard had hardly time to think what she should do, as she laid her book upon her knee and looked nervously over her shoulder towards the door. It was awkward, she thought, but it could not be helped. In such weather it seemed absurd to send the squire away because her little girl was not with her. He had come all the way down from the Hall to spend this dreary afternoon at the cottage — she could not send him away. There were sounds in the passage as of some one depositing a waterproof coat and an umbrella, the door opened and Mr. Juxon appeared upon the threshold.

"Come in," said Mrs. Goddard, banishing her scruples as soon as she saw him. "I am all alone," she added rather apologetically. The squire, who was a simple man in many ways, understood the remark and felt slightly embarrassed.

"Is Miss Nellie out?" he asked, coming forward and taking Mrs. Goddard's hand. He had not yet reached the point of calling the child plain "Nellie;" he would have thought it an undue familiarity.

"She is gone to the vicarage," answered Mrs. Goddard. "What a dreadful day! You must be nearly frozen. Will you have a cup of tea?"

"No thanks — no, you are very kind. I have had a good walk; I am not cold — never am. As you say, in such weather I could not resist the temptation to come in. This is a capital day to test that India-rubber tubing we have put round your windows. Excuse me — I will just look and see if the air comes through."

Mr. Juxon carefully examined the windows of the sitting-room and then returned to his seat.

"It is quite air-tight, I think," he said with some satisfaction, as he smoothed his hair with his hand.

"Oh, quite," said Mrs. Goddard. "It was so very good of you."

"Not a bit of it," returned the squire cheerily. "A landlord's chief pre-occupation ought to be the comfort of his tenants and his next thought should be to keep his houses in repair. I never owned any houses before, so I have determined to start with good principles."

"I am sure you succeed. You walked down?"

"Always walk, in any weather. It is much less trouble and much cheaper. Besides, I like it."

"The best of all reasons. Then you will not have any tea? I almost wish you would, because I want some myself."

"Oh of course — in that case I shall be delighted. Shall I ring?"

He rang and Martha brought the tea. Some time was consumed in the preparations which Mr. Juxon watched with interest as though he had never seen tea made before. Everything that Mrs. Goddard did interested him.

"I do not know why it is," she said at last, "but weather like this is delightful when one is safe at home. I suppose it is the contrast — "

"Yes indeed. It is like the watch below in dirty weather."

"Excuse me — I don't quite understand — "

"At sea," explained the squire. "There is no luxury like being below when the decks are wet and there is heavy weather about."

"I should think so," said Mrs. Goddard. "Have you been at sea much, Mr. Juxon?"

"Thirty years," returned the squire laconically. Mrs. Goddard looked at him in astonishment.

"You don't mean to say you have been a sailor all your life?"

"Does that surprise you? I have been a sailor since I was twelve years old. But I got very tired of it. It is a hard life."

"Were you in the navy, Mr. Juxon?" asked Mrs. Goddard eagerly, feeling that she was at last upon the track of some information in regard to his past life.

"Yes — I was in the navy," answered the squire, slowly. "And then I was at college, and then in the navy again. At last I entered the merchant service and commanded my own ships for nearly twenty years."

"How very extraordinary! Why then, you must have been everywhere."

"Very nearly. But I would much rather be in Billingsfield."

"You never told me," said Mrs. Goddard almost reproachfully. "What a change it must have been for you, from the sea to the life of a country gentleman!"

"It is what I always wanted."

"But you do not seem at all like the sea captains one hears about — "

"Well, perhaps not," replied the squire thoughtfully. "There are a great many different classes of sea captains. I always had a taste for books. A man can read a great deal on a long voyage. I have sometimes been at sea for more than two years at a time. Besides, I had a fairly good education and — well, I suppose it was because I was a gentleman to begin with and was more than ten years in the Royal Navy. All that makes a great difference. Have you ever made a long voyage, Mrs. Goddard?"

"I have crossed the channel," said she. "But I wish you would tell me something more about your life."

"Oh no — it is very dull, all that. You always make me talk about myself," said the squire in a tone of protestation.

"It is very interesting."

"But — could we not vary the conversation by talking about you a little?" suggested Mr. Juxon.

"Oh no! Please — " exclaimed Mrs. Goddard rather nervously. She grew pale and busied herself again with the tea. "Do tell me more about your voyages. I suppose that was the way you collected so many beautiful things, was it not?"

"Yes, I suppose so," answered the squire, looking at her curiously. "In fact of course it was. I was a great deal in China and South America and India, and in all sorts of places where one picks up things."

"And in Turkey, too, where you got Stamboul?"

"Yes. He was so wet that I left him outside today. Did not want to spoil your carpet."

The squire had a way of turning the subject when he seemed upon the point of talking about himself which was very annoying to Mrs. Goddard. But she had not entirely recovered her equanimity and for the moment had lost control of the squire. Besides she had a headache that day.

"Stamboul does not get the benefit of the contrast we were talking about at first," she remarked, in order to say something.

"I could not possibly bring him in," returned the squire looking at her again. "Excuse me, Mrs. Goddard — I don't mean to be inquisitive you know, but — I always want to be of any use."

She looked at him inquiringly.

"I mean, to be frank, I am afraid that something is giving you trouble. I have noticed it for some time. You know, if I can be of any use, if I can help you in any way — you have only to say the word."

Again she looked at him. She did not know why it was so, but the genuinely friendly tone in which he made the offer touched her. She was surprised, however; she could not understand why he should think she was in trouble, and indeed she was in no greater distress than she had suffered during the greater part of the last three years.

"You are very kind, Mr. Juxon. But there is nothing the matter — I have a headache."

"Oh," said the squire, "I beg your pardon." He looked away and seemed embarrassed.

"You have done too much already," said Mrs. Goddard, fearing that she had not sufficiently acknowledged his offer of assistance.

"I cannot do too much. That is impossible," he

said in a tone of conviction. "I have very few friends, Mrs. Goddard, and I like to think that you are one of the best of them."

"I am sure — I don't know what to say, Mr. Juxon," she answered, somewhat startled by the directness of his speech. "I am sure you have always been most kind, and I hope you do not think me ungrateful."

"I? You? No — dear me, please never mention it! The fact is, Mrs. Goddard — " he stopped and smoothed his hair. "What particularly disagreeable weather," he remarked irrelevantly, looking out of the window at the driving sleet.

Mrs. Goddard looked down and slowly stirred her tea. She was pale and her hand trembled a little, but no one could have guessed that she was suffering any strong emotion. Mr. Juxon looked towards the window, and the grey light of the winter's afternoon fell coldly upon his square sunburned face and carefully trimmed beard. He was silent for a moment, and then, still looking away from his companion, he continued in a less hesitating tone.

"The fact is, I have been thinking a great deal of late," he said, "and it has struck me that your friendship has grown to be the most important thing in my life." He paused again and turned his hat round upon his knee. Still Mrs. Goddard said nothing, and as he did not look at her he did not perceive that she was unnaturally agitated.

"I have told you what my life has been," he continued presently. "I have been a sailor. I made a little money. I finally inherited my uncle's estate here. I will tell you anything else you would like to ask — I don't think I ever did anything to conceal. I

am forty-two years old. I have about five thousand a year and I am naturally economical. I would like to make you a proposal — a very respectful proposal, Mrs. Goddard — "

Mrs. Goddard uttered a faint exclamation of surprise and fell back in her chair, staring with wide eyes at the squire, her cheeks very pale and her lips white. He was too much absorbed in what he was saying to notice the short smothered ejaculation, and he was too much embarrassed to look at her.

"Mrs. Goddard," he said, his voice trembling slightly, "will you marry me?"

He was not prepared for the result of his speech. He had pondered it for some time and had come to the conclusion that it was best to say as little as possible and to say it plainly. It was an honourable proposal of marriage from a man in middle life to a lady he had known and respected for many months: there was very little romance about it; he did not intend that there should be any. As soon as he had spoken he turned his head and looked to her for his answer. Mrs. Goddard had clasped her small white hands over her face and had turned her head away from him against the cushion of the high backed chair. The squire felt very uncomfortable in the dead silence, broken only by the sleet driving against the window panes with a hissing, rattling sound, and by the singing of the tea-kettle. For some seconds, which to Juxon seemed like an eternity, Mrs. Goddard did not move. At last she suddenly dropped her hands and looked into the squire's eyes. He was startled by the ashen hue of her face.

"It is impossible," she said, shortly, in broken tones. But the squire was prepared for some difficulties.

"I do not see the impossibility," he said quite calmly. "Of course, I would not press you for an answer, my dear Mrs. Goddard. I am afraid I have been very abrupt, but I will go away, I will leave you to consider —"

"Oh no, no!" cried the poor lady in great distress. "It is quite impossible — I assure you it is quite, quite impossible!"

"I don't know," said Mr. Juxon, who saw that she was deeply moved, but was loath to abandon the field without a further struggle. "I am not a very young man, it is true — but I am not a very old one either. You, my dear Mrs. Goddard, have been a widow for some years —"

"I?" cried Mrs. Goddard with a wild hysterical laugh. "I! Oh God of mercy! I wish I were." Again she buried her face in the cushion. Her bosom heaved violently.

The squire started as though he had been struck, and the blood rushed to his brown face so that the great veins on his temples stood out like cords.

"Did I — did I understand you to say that — your husband is living?" he asked in a strong, loud voice, ringing with emotion.

Mrs. Goddard moved a little and seemed to make a great effort to speak.

"Yes," she said very faintly. The squire rose to his feet and paced the room in terrible agitation.

"But where?" he asked, stopping suddenly in his walk. "Mrs. Goddard, I think I have a right to ask where he is — why you have never spoken of him?"

By a supreme effort the unfortunate lady raised herself from her seat supporting herself upon one hand, and faced the squire with wildly staring eyes.

"You have a right to know," she said. "He is in Portland — sentenced to twelve years hard labour for forgery."

She said it all, to the end, and then fell back into her chair. But she did not hide her face this time. The fair pathetic features were quite motionless and white, without any expression, and her hands lay with the palms turned upwards on her knees.

Charles James Juxon was a man of few words, not given to using strong language on any occasion. But he was completely overcome by the horror of the thing. He turned icy cold as he stood still, rooted to the spot, and he uttered aloud one strong and solemn ejaculation, more an invocation than an oath, as though he called on heaven to witness the misery he looked upon. He gazed at the colourless, inanimate face of the poor lady and walked slowly to the window. There he stood for fully five minutes, motionless, staring out at the driving sleet.

Mrs. Goddard had fainted away, but it did not occur to the squire to attempt to recall her to her senses. It seemed merciful that she should have lost consciousness even for a moment. Indeed she needed no help, for in a few minutes she slowly opened her eyes and closed them, then opened them again and saw Mr. Juxon's figure darkening the window against the grey light.

"Mr. Juxon," she said faintly, "come here, please."

The squire started and turned. Then he came and sat down beside her. His face was very stern and grave, and he said nothing.

"Mr. Juxon," said Mrs. Goddard, speaking in a low voice, but with far more calm than he could have expected, "you have a right to know my story.

You have been very kind to me, you have made an honourable offer to me, you have said you were my friend. I ought to have told you before. If I had had any idea of what was passing in your mind, I would have told you, cost what it might."

Mr. Juxon gravely bowed his head. She was quite right, he thought. He had a right to know all. With all his kind-heartedness he was a stern man by nature.

"Yes," continued Mrs. Goddard, "you have every right to know. My husband," her voice trembled, "was the head of an important firm in London. I was the only child of his partner. Not long after my father's death I married Mr. Goddard. He was an extravagant man of brilliant tastes. I had a small fortune of my own which my father had settled upon me, independent of his share in the firm. My guardians, of whom my husband was one, advised me to leave my father's fortune in the concern. When I came of age, a year after my marriage, I agreed to do it. My husband — I never knew it till long afterwards — was very rash. He speculated on the Exchange and tampered with the deposits placed in his hands. We lived in great luxury. I knew nothing of his affairs. Three years ago, after we had been married nearly ten years, the firm failed. It was a fraudulent bankruptcy. My husband fled but was captured and brought back. It appeared that at the last moment, in the hope of retrieving his position and saving the firm, he had forged the name of one of his own clients for a large amount. We had a country place at Putney which he had given to me. I sold it, with all my jewels and most of my possessions. I would have given up everything I possessed, but I

thought of Nellie — poor little Nellie. The lawyers assured me that I ought to keep my own little fortune. I kept about five hundred a year. It is more than I need, but it seemed very little then. The lawyer who conducted the defence, such as it was, advised me to go abroad, but I would not. Then he spoke of Mr. Ambrose, who had educated his son, and gave me a note to him. I came here and I told Mr. Ambrose my whole story. I only wanted to be alone — I thought I did right — "

Her courage had sustained her so far, but it had been a great effort. Her voice trembled and broke and at last the tears began to glisten in her eyes.

"Does Nellie know?" asked the squire, who had sat very gravely by her side, but who was in reality deeply moved.

"No — she thinks he — that he is dead," faltered Mrs. Goddard. Then she fairly burst into tears and sobbed passionately, covering her face and rocking herself from side to side.

"My dear friend," said Mr. Juxon very kindly and laying one hand upon her arm, "pray try and calm yourself. Forgive me — I beg you to forgive me for having caused you so much pain — "

"Do you still call me a friend?" sobbed the poor lady.

"Indeed I do," quoth the squire stoutly. And he meant it. Mrs. Goddard dropped her hands and stared into the fire through her falling tears.

"I think you behaved very honourably — very generously," continued Mr. Juxon, who did not know precisely how to console her, and indeed stood much in need of consolation himself. "Perhaps I had better leave you — you are very much

agitated — you must need rest — would you not rather that I should go?"

"Yes — it is better," said she, still staring at the fire. "You know all about me now," she added in a tone of pathetic regret. The squire rose to his feet.

"I hope," he said with some hesitation, "that this — this very unfortunate day will not prevent our being friends — better friends than before?"

Mrs. Goddard looked up gratefully through her tears.

"How good you are!" she said softly.

"Not at all — I am not at all good — I only want to be your friend. Good-bye — G — God bless you!" He seized her hand and squeezed it and then hurried out of the room. A moment later he was crossing the road with Stamboul, who was very tired of waiting, bounding before him.

The squire was not a romantic character. He was a strong plain man, who had seen the world and was used to most forms of danger and to a good many forms of suffering. He was kind-hearted and generous, capable of feeling sincere sympathy for others, and under certain circumstances of being deeply wounded himself. He had indeed a far more refined nature than he himself suspected and on this memorable day he had experienced more emotions than he remembered to have felt in the course of many years.

After long debate and after much searching inquiry into his own motives he had determined to offer himself to Mrs. Goddard, and he had accordingly done so in his own straightforward manner. It had seemed a very important action in his life, a very solemn step, but he was not prepared for the acute sense of disap-

pointment which he felt when Mrs. Goddard first said it was impossible for her to accept him, still less had he anticipated the extraordinary story which she had told him, in explanation of her refusal. His ideas were completely upset. That Mrs. Goddard was not a widow after all, was almost as astounding as that she should prove to be the wife of a felon. But Mr. Juxon was no less persuaded that she herself was a perfectly good and noble woman, than he had been before. He felt that he would like to cut the throat of the villain himself; but he resolved that he would more than ever try to be a good friend to Mrs. Goddard.

He walked slowly through the storm towards his house, his broad figure facing the wind and sleet with as much ease as a steamer forging against a head sea. He was perfectly indifferent to the weather; but Stamboul slunk along at his heels, shielding himself from the driving wet snow behind his master's sturdy legs. The squire was very much disturbed. The sight of his own solemn butler affected him strangely. He stared about the library in a vacant way, as though he had never seen the place before. The realisation of his own calm and luxurious life seemed unnatural, and his thoughts went back to the poor weeping woman he had just left. She, too, had enjoyed all this, and more also. She had probably been richer than he. And now she was living on five hundred a year in one of his own cottages, hiding her shame in desolate Billingsfield, the shame of her husband, the forger.

It was such a hopeless position, the squire thought. No one could help her, no one could do anything for her. For many weeks, revolving the situation in his

mind, he had amused himself by thinking how she would look when she should be mistress of the Hall, and wondering whether little Nellie would call him "father," or merely "Mr. Juxon." And now, she turned out to be the wife of a forger, sentenced to hard labour in a convict prison, for twelve years. For twelve years — nearly three must have elapsed already. In nine years more Goddard would be out again. Would he claim his wife? Of course — he would come back to her for support. And poor little Nellie thought he was dead! It would be a terrible day when she had to be told. If he only would die in prison! — but men sentenced to hard labour rarely die. They are well cared for. It is a healthy life. He would certainly live through it and come back to claim his wife. Poor Mrs. Goddard! her troubles were not ended yet, though the State had provided her with a respite of twelve years.

The squire sat long in his easy-chair in the great library, and forgot to dress for dinner — he always dressed, even though he was quite alone. But the solemn face of his butler betrayed neither emotion nor surprise when the master of the Hall walked into the dining-room in his knickerbockers.

CHAPTER XII.

When Nellie came home from the vicarage she found her mother looking very ill. There were dark rings under her eyes, and her features were drawn and tear-stained, while the beautiful waves of her brown hair had lost their habitual neatness and symmetry. The child noticed these things, with a child's quickness, but explained them on the ground that her mother's headache was probably much worse. Mrs. Goddard accepted the explanation and on the following day Nellie had forgotten all about it; but her mother remembered it long, and it was many days before she recovered entirely from the shock of her interview with the squire. The latter did not come to see her as usual, but on the morning after his visit he sent her down a package of books and some orchids from his hothouses. He thought it best to leave her to herself for a little while; the very sight of him, he argued, would be painful to her, and any meeting with her would be painful to himself. He did not go out of the house, but spent the whole day in his library among his books, not indeed reading, but pretending to himself that he was very busy. Being a strong and sensible man he did not waste time in bemoaning his sorrows, but he thought about them long and earnestly. The more he thought, the more it appeared to him that Mrs. Goddard was the person who deserved pity rather than he himself.

His mind dwelt on the terrors of her position in case her husband should return and claim his wife and daughter when the twelve years were over, and he thought with horror of Nellie's humiliation, if at the age of twenty she should discover that her father during all these years had not been honourably dead and buried, but had been suffering the punishment of a felon in Portland. That the only attempt he had ever made to enter the matrimonial state should have been so singularly unfortunate was indeed a matter which caused him sincere sorrow; he had thought too often of being married to Mary Goddard to be able to give up the idea without a sigh. But it is due to him to say that in the midst of his own disappointment he thought much more of her sorrows than of his own, a state of mind most probably due to his temperament.

He saw also how impossible it was to console Mrs. Goddard or even to alleviate the distress of mind which she must constantly feel. Her destiny was accomplished in part, and the remainder seemed absolutely inevitable. No one could prevent her husband from leaving his prison when his crime was expiated; and no one could then prevent him from joining his wife and ending his life under her roof. At least so it seemed. Endless complications would follow. Mrs. Goddard would certainly have to leave Billingsfield — no one could expect the Ambroses or the squire himself to associate with a convict forger. Mr. Juxon vaguely wondered whether he should live another nine years to see the end of all this, and he inwardly determined to go to sea again rather than to witness such misery. He could not see, no one could see how things could possibly turn out in any

other way. It would have been some comfort to have gone to the vicar, and to have discussed with him the possibilities of Mrs. Goddard's future. The vicar was a man after his own heart, honest, reliable, charitable and brave; but Mr. Juxon thought that it would not be quite loyal towards Mrs. Goddard if he let any one else know that he was acquainted with her story.

For two days he stayed at home and then he went to see her. To his surprise she received him very quietly, much as she usually did, without betraying any emotion; whereupon he wished that he had not allowed two days to pass without making his usual visit. Mrs. Goddard almost wished so too. She had been so much accustomed to regard the squire as a friend, and she had so long been used to the thought that Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose knew of her past trouble, that the fact of the squire becoming acquainted with her history seemed to her less important, now that it was accomplished, than it seemed to the squire himself. She had long thought of telling him all; she had seriously contemplated doing so when he first came to Billingsfield, and now at last the thing was done. She was glad of it. She was no longer in a false position; he could never again think of marrying her; they could henceforth meet as friends, since he was so magnanimous as to allow their friendship to exist. Her pride had suffered so terribly in the beginning that it was past suffering now. She felt that she was in the position of a suppliant asking only for a quiet resting-place for herself and her daughter, and she was grateful to the people who gave her what she asked, feeling that she had fallen among good Samaritans, whereas in merry England

it would have been easy for her to have fallen among priests and Pharisees.

So it came about that in a few days her relations with Mr. Juxon were re-established upon a new basis, but more firmly and satisfactorily than before, seeing that now there was no possibility of mistake. And for a long time it seemed as though matters would go on as before. Neither Mrs. Goddard nor the squire ever referred to the interview on that memorable stormy afternoon, and so far as the squire could judge his life and hers might go on with perfect tranquillity until it should please the powers that be and the governor of Portland to set Mr. Walter Goddard at liberty. Heaven only knew what would happen then, but it was provided that there should be plenty of time to prepare for anything which might ensue. The point upon which Mrs. Goddard had not spoken plainly was that which concerned her probable treatment of her husband after his liberation. She had passed that question over in silence. She had probably never dared to decide. Most probably she would at the last minute seek some safer retreat than Billingsfield and make up her mind to hide for the rest of her life. But Mr. Juxon had heard of women who had carried charity as far as to receive back their husbands under even worse circumstances; women were soft-hearted creatures, reflected the squire, and capable of anything.

Few people in such a situation could have acted consistently as though nothing had happened. But Mr. Juxon's extremely reticent nature found it easy to bury other people's important secrets at least as deeply as he buried the harmless details of his own honest life. Not a hair of his smooth head was

ruffled, not a line of his square manly face was disturbed. He looked and acted precisely as he had looked and acted before. His butler remarked that he ate a little less heartily of late, and that on one evening, as has been recorded, the squire forgot to dress for dinner. But the butler in his day had seen greater eccentricities than these; he had the greatest admiration for Mr. Juxon and was not inclined to cavil at small things. A real gentleman, of the good sort, who dressed for dinner when he was alone, who never took too much wine, who never bullied the servants nor quarrelled unjustly with the bills, was, as the butler expressed it, "not to be sneezed at, on no account." The place was a little dull, but the functionary was well stricken in years and did not like hard work. Mr. Juxon seemed to be conscious that as he never had visitors at the Hall and as there were consequently no "tips," his staff was entitled to an occasional fee, which he presented always with great regularity, and which had the desired effect. He was a generous man as well as a just.

The traffic in roses and orchids and new books continued as usual between the Hall and the cottage, and for many weeks nothing extraordinary occurred. Mrs. Ambrose and Mrs. Goddard met frequently, and the only difference to be observed in the manner of the former was that she mentioned John Short very often, and every time she mentioned him she fixed her grey eyes sternly upon Mrs. Goddard, who however did not notice the scrutiny, or, if she did, was not in the least disturbed by it. For a long time Mrs. Ambrose entertained a feeble intention of addressing Mrs. Goddard directly upon the subject of John's affections, but the longer she put off doing

so, the harder it seemed to do it. Mrs. Ambrose had great faith in the sternness of her eye under certain circumstances, and seeing that Mrs. Goddard never winced, she gradually fell into the belief that John had been the more to blame, if there was any blame in the matter. She had indeed succeeded in the first instance, by methods of her own which have been heretofore detailed, in extracting a sort of reluctant admission from her husband; but since that day he had proved obdurate to all entreaty. Once only he had said with considerable impatience that John was a very silly boy, and was much better engaged with his books at college than in running after Mrs. Goddard. That was all, and gradually as the regular and methodical life at the vicarage effaced the memory of the doings at Christmas time, the good Mrs. Ambrose forgot that anything unpleasant had ever occurred. There was no disturbance of the existing relations and everything went on as before for many weeks. The February thaw set in early and the March winds began to blow before February was fairly out. Nat Barker the octogenarian cripple, who had the reputation of being a weather prophet, was understood to have said that the spring was "loike to be forrard t'year," and the minds of the younger inhabitants were considerably relieved. Not that Nat Barker's prophecies were usually fulfilled; no one ever remembered them at the time when they might have been verified. But they were always made at the season when people had nothing to do but to talk about them. Mr. Thomas Reid, the conservative sexton, turned up his nose at them, and said he "wished Nat Barker had to dig a parish depth grave in three hours without a drop of nothin' to wet

his pipe with, and if he didden fine that groun' oncommon owdacious Thomas Reid he didden know. They didden know nothin', sir, them parish cripples." Wherewith the worthy sexton took his way with a battered tin can to get his "fours" at the Feathers. He did not patronise the Duke's Head. It was too new-fangled for him, and he suspected his arch enemy, Mr. Abraham Boosey, of putting a rat or two into the old beer to make it "draw," which accounted for its being so "hard." But Mr. Abraham Boosey was the undertaker, and he, Thomas Reid, was the sexton, and it did not do to express these views too loudly, lest perchance Mr. Boosey should, just in his play, construct a coffin or two just too big for the regulation grave, and thereby leave Mr. Reid in the lurch. For the undertaker and the gravedigger are as necessary to each other, as Mr. Reid maintained, as a pair of blackbirds in a hedge.

But the spring was "forrard t'year" and the weather was consequently even more detestable than usual at that season. The roads were heavy. The rain seemed never weary of pouring down and the wind never tired of blowing. The wet and leafless creepers beat against the walls of the cottage, and the chimneys smoked both there and at the vicarage. The rooms were pervaded with a disagreeable smell of damp coal smoke, and the fires struggled desperately to burn against the overwhelming odds of rain and wind which came down the chimneys. Mrs. Goddard never remembered to have been so uncomfortable during the two previous winters she had spent in Billingsfield, and even Nellie grew impatient and petulant. The only bright spot in those long days seemed to be made by the regular visits of

Mr. Juxon, by the equally regular bi-weekly appearance of the Ambroses when they came to tea, and by the little dinners at the vicarage. The weather had grown so wet and the roads so bad that on these latter occasions the vicar sent his dogcart with Reynolds and the old mare, Strawberry, to fetch his two guests. Even Mr. Juxon, who always walked when he could, had got into the habit of driving down to the cottage in a strange-looking gig which he had imported from America, and which, among all the many possessions of the squire, alone attracted the unfavourable comment of his butler. He would have preferred to see a good English dogcart, high in the seat and wheels, at the door of the Hall, instead of that outlandish vehicle; but Joseph Ruggles, the groom, explained to him that it was easier to clean than a dogcart, and that when it rained he sat inside with the squire.

On a certain evening in February, towards the end of the month, Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose and Mr. Juxon came to have tea with Mrs. Goddard. Mr. Juxon had at first not been regularly invited to these entertainments. They were perhaps not thought worthy of his grandeur; at all events both the vicar's wife and Mrs. Goddard had asked him very rarely. But as time went on and Mr. Juxon's character developed under the eyes of the little Billingsfield society, it had become apparent to every one that he was a very simple man, making no pretensions whatever to any superiority on account of his station. They grew more and more fond of him, and ended by asking him to their small sociable evenings. On these occasions it generally occurred that the squire and the vicar fell into conversation about classical and literary subjects while the two ladies talked of the little incidents

of Billingsfield life, of Tom Judd's wife and baby, of Joe Staines, the choir boy, who was losing his voice, and of similar topics of interest in the very small world in which they lived.

The present evening had not been at all a remarkable one so far as the talk was concerned. The drenching rain, the tendency of the fire to smoke, the general wetness and condensed depravity of the atmosphere had affected the spirits of the little party. They were not gay, and they broke up early. It was not nine o'clock when all had gone, and Mrs. Goddard and little Eleanor were left alone by the side of their drawing-room fire. The child sat upon a footstool and leaned her head against her mother's knee. Mrs. Goddard herself was thoughtful and sad, without precisely knowing why. She generally looked forward with pleasure to meeting the Ambroses, but this evening she had been rather disappointed. The conversation had dragged, and the excellent Mrs. Ambrose had been more than usually prosy. Nellie had complained of a headache and leaned wearily against her mother's knee.

"Tell me a story, mamma — won't you? Like the ones you used to tell me when I was quite a little girl."

"Dear child," said her mother, who was not thinking of story-telling, "I am afraid I have forgotten all the ones I ever knew. Besides, darling, it is time for you to go to bed."

"I don't want to go to bed, mamma. It is such a horrid night. The wind keeps me awake."

"You will not sleep at all if I tell you a story," objected Mrs. Goddard.

"Mr. Juxon tells me such nice stories," said Nellie, reproachfully.

"What are they about, dear?"

"Oh, his stories are beautiful. They are always about ships and the blue sea and wonderful desert islands where he has been. What a wonderful man he is, mamma, is not he?"

"Yes, dear, he talks very interestingly." Mrs. Goddard stroked Nellie's brown curls and looked into the fire.

"He told me that once, ever so many years ago — he must be very old, mamma —" Nellie paused and looked up inquiringly.

"Well, darling — not so very, very old. I think he is over forty."

"Over forty — four times eleven — he is not four times as old as I am. Almost, though. All his stories are ever so many years ago. He said he was sailing away ever so far, in a perfectly new ship, and the name of the ship was — let me see, what was the name? I think it was —"

Mrs. Goddard started suddenly and laid her hand on the child's shoulder.

"Did you hear anything, Nellie?" she asked quickly. Nellie looked up in some surprise.

"No, mamma. When? Just now? It must have been the wind. It is such a horrid night. The name of the ship was the 'Zephyr' — I remember, now." She looked up again to see if her mother was listening to the story. Mrs. Goddard looked pale and glanced uneasily towards the closed window. She had probably been mistaken.

"And where did the ship sail to, Nellie dear?" she asked, smoothing the child's curls again and forcing herself to smile.

"Oh — the ship was a perfectly new ship and it

was the most beautiful weather in the world. They were sailing away ever so far, towards the straits of Magellan. I was so glad because I knew where the straits of Magellan were — and Mr. Juxon was immensely astonished. But I had been learning about the Terra del Fuego, and the people who were frozen there, in my geography that very morning — was not it lucky? So I knew all about it — mamma, how nervous you are! It is nothing but the wind. I wish you would listen to my story — "

"I am listening, darling," said Mrs. Goddard, making a strong effort to overcome her agitation and drawing the child closer to her. "Go on, sweetheart — you were in the straits of Magellan, you said, sailing away — "

"Mr. Juxon was, mamma," said Nellie correcting her mother with the asperity of a child who does not receive all the attention it expects.

"Of course, dear, Mr. Juxon, and the ship was the 'Zephyr.' "

"Yes — the 'Zephyr,' " repeated Nellie, who was easily pacified. "It was at Christmas time he said — but that is summer in the southern hemisphere," she added, proud of her knowledge. "So it was very fine weather. And Mr. Juxon was walking up and down the deck in the afternoon, smoking a cigar — "

"He never smokes, dear," interrupted Mrs. Goddard, glad to show Nellie that she was listening.

"Well, but he did then, because he said so," returned Nellie unmoved. "And as he walked and looked out — sailors always look out, you know — he saw the most wonderful thing, close to the ship — the most wonderful thing he ever saw," added Nellie with some redundance of expression.

"Was it a whale, child?" asked her mother, staring into the fire and trying to pay attention.

"A whale, mamma!" repeated Nellie contemptuously. "As if there were anything remarkable about a whale! Mr. Juxon has seen billions of whales, I am sure."

"Well, what was it, dear?"

"It was the most awfully tremendous thing with green and blue scales, a thousand times as big as the ship — oh mamma! What was that?"

Nellie started up from her stool and knelt beside her mother, looking towards the window. Mrs. Goddard was deathly pale and grasped the arm of her chair.

"Somebody knocked at the window, mamma," said Nellie breathlessly. "And then somebody said 'Mary' — quite loud. Oh mamma, what can it be?"

"Mary?" repeated Mrs. Goddard as though she were in a dream.

"Yes — quite loud. Oh mamma! it must be Mary's young man — he does sometimes come in the evening."

"Mary's young man, child?" Mrs. Goddard's heart leaped. Her cook's name was Mary, as well as her own. Nellie naturally never associated the name with her mother, as she never heard anybody call her by it.

"Yes mamma. Don't you know? The postman — the man with the piebald horse." The explanation was necessary, as Mrs. Goddard rarely received any letters and probably did not know the postman by sight.

"At this time of night!" exclaimed Mrs. Goddard. "It is too bad. Mary is gone to bed."

"Perhaps he thinks you are gone to the vicarage and that Mary is sitting up for you in the drawing-room," suggested Nellie with much good sense. "Well, he can't come in, can he, mamma?"

"Certainly not," said her mother. "But I think you had much better go to bed, my dear. It is half-past nine." She spoke indistinctly, almost thickly, and seemed to be making a violent effort to control herself. But Nellie had settled down upon her stool again, and did not notice her mother.

"Oh not yet," said she. "I have not nearly finished about the sea-serpent. Mr. Juxon said it was not like anything in the world. Do listen, mamma! It is the most wonderful story you ever heard. It was all covered with blue and green scales, and it rolled, and rolled, and rolled, and rolled, till at last it rolled up against the side of the ship with such a tremendous bump that Mr. Juxon fell right down on his back."

"Yes dear," said Mrs. Goddard mechanically, as the child paused.

"You don't seem to mind at all!" cried Nellie, who felt that her efforts to amuse her mother were not properly appreciated. "He fell right down on his back and hurt himself awfully."

"That was very sad," said Mrs. Goddard. "Did he catch the sea-serpent afterwards?"

"Catch the sea-serpent! Why mamma, don't you know that nobody has ever caught the sea-serpent? Why, hardly anybody has ever seen him, even!"

"Yes dear, but I thought Mr. Juxon —"

"Of course, Mr. Juxon is the most wonderful man — but he could not catch the sea-serpent. Just fancy! When he got up from his fall, he looked and he saw him quite half a mile away. He must have

gone awfully fast, should not you think so? Because, you know, it was only a minute."

"Yes, my child; and it is a beautiful story, and you told it so nicely. It is very interesting and you must tell me another to-morrow. But now, dear, you must really go to bed, because I am going to bed, too. That man startled me so," she said, passing her small white hand over her pale forehead and then staring into the fire.

"Well, I don't wonder," answered Nellie in a patronising tone. "Such a dreadful night too! Of course, it would startle anybody. But he won't try again, and you can scold Mary to-morrow and then she can scold her young man."

The child spoke so naturally that all doubts vanished from Mrs. Goddard's mind. She reflected that children are much more apt to see things as they are, than grown people whose nerves are out of order. Nellie's conclusions were perfectly logical, and it seemed folly to doubt them. She determined that Mary should certainly be scolded on the morrow and she unconsciously resolved in her mind the words she should use; for she was rather a timid woman and stood a little in awe of her stalwart Berkshire cook, with her mighty arms and her red face, and her uncommonly plain language.

"Yes dear," she said more quietly than she had been able to speak for some time, "I have no doubt you are quite right. I thought I heard his footsteps just now, going down the path. So he will not trouble us any more to-night. And now darling, kneel down and say your prayers, and then we will go to bed."

So Nellie, reassured by the news that her mother

was going to bed, too, knelt down as she had done every night during the eleven years of her life, and clasped her hands together, beneath her mother's. Then she cleared her throat, then she glanced at the clock, then she looked for one moment into the sweet serious violet eyes that looked down on her so lovingly, and then at last she bent her lovely little head and began to say her prayers, there, by the fire, at her mother's knees, while angry storm howled fiercely without and shook the closed panes and shutters and occasional drops of rain, falling down the short chimney, sputtered in the smouldering coal fire.

"Our Father which art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name, Thy Kingdom come —"

Nellie gave a loud scream and springing up from her knees flung her arms around her mother's neck, in uttermost, wildest terror.

"Mamma, mamma!" she cried looking, and yet hardly daring to look, back towards the closed window. "It called 'MARY GODDARD'! It is you, mamma! Oh!"

There was no mistaking it this time. While Nellie was saying her prayer there had come three sharp and distinct raps upon the wooden shutter, and a voice, not loud but clear, penetrating into the room in spite of wind and storm and rain.

"Mary Goddard! Mary Goddard!" it said.

Mrs. Goddard started to her feet, lifting Nellie bodily from the ground in her agony of terror; staring round the room wildly as though in search of some possible escape.

"I must come in! I will come in!" said the voice again.

"Oh don't let him in! Mamma! Don't let him in!" moaned the terrified child upon her breast, clinging to her and weighing her down, and grasping her neck and arm with convulsive strength.

But in moments of great agitation timid people, or people who are thought timid, not uncommonly do brave things. Mrs. Goddard unclasped Nellie's hold and forced the terror-struck child into a deep chair.

"Stay there, darling," she said with unnatural calmness. "Do not be afraid. I will go and open the door."

Nellie was now too much frightened to resist. Mrs. Goddard went out into the little passage which was dimly lighted by a hanging lamp, and closed the door of the drawing-room behind her. She could hear Nellie's occasional convulsive sobs distinctly. For one moment she paused, her right hand on the lock of the front door, her left hand pressed to her side, leaning against the wall of the passage. Then she turned the key and the handle and drew the door in towards her. A violent gust of wind, full of cold and drenching rain, whirled into the passage and almost blinded her. The lamp flickered in the lantern overhead. But she looked boldly out, facing the wind and weather.

"Come in!" she called in a low voice.

Immediately there was a sound as of footsteps coming from the direction of the drawing-room window, across the wet slate flags which surrounded the cottage, and a moment afterwards, peering through the darkness, Mrs. Goddard saw a man with a ghastly face standing before her in the rain.

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. GODDARD'S heart stood still as she looked at the wretched man, and tried to discover her husband's face, even a resemblance to him, in the haggard features she saw close before her. But he gave her small time for reflection; so soon as he had recognised her he sprang past her into the passage and pulling her after him closed the door.

"Mary — don't you know me?" he said, in low tones. "You must save me — they are after me — " He stood close beside her in the narrow way, beneath the small lamp; he tried to put his arm around her and he bent down and brought his ghastly face close to hers. But she drew back as from a contamination. She was horrified, and it was a natural movement. She knew his voice even better than his features, now that he spoke. He pressed nearer to her and she thrust him back with her hands. Then suddenly a thought struck her; she took him by the sleeve and led him into the dining-room. There was no light there; she pushed him in.

"Stay there one minute — "

"No — no, you won't call — "

"I will save you — there is — there is somebody in the drawing-room." Before he could answer her she was gone, leaving him alone in the dark. He listened intently, not venturing to leave the spot where she had placed him; he thought he heard voices and

footsteps, but no one came out into the passage. It seemed an eternity to wait. At last she came, bearing a lighted candle in her hand. She carefully shut the door of the dining-room behind her and put the light upon the table. She moved like a person in a dream.

"Sit down," she said, pointing to a chair. "Are you hungry?" His sunken eyes sparkled. She brought food and ale and set them before him. He ate and drank voraciously in silence. She sat at the opposite side of the table — the solitary candle between them, and shading her eyes with one hand she gazed at his face.

Walter Goddard was a man at least forty years of age. He had been thought very handsome once. He had light blue eyes and a fair skin with flaxen hair — now cropped short and close to his head. There was nearly a fortnight's growth of beard upon his face, but it was not yet sufficient to hide his mouth and chin. He had formerly worn a heavy moustache and it was chiefly the absence of it which now made it hard for his wife to recognise him. A battered hat, drenched and dripping with rain, shaded his brows. Possibly he was ashamed to remove it. His mouth was small and weak and his jaw was pointed. His whole expression was singularly disagreeable — his hands were filthy, and his face was not clean. About his neck was twisted a ragged woollen comforter, and he wore a smock-frock which was now soaked with water and clung to his thin figure. He devoured the food his wife had brought him, shivering from time to time as though he were still cold.

Mrs. Goddard watched him in silence. She had done mechanically according to her first instinct, had

led him in and had given him food. But she had not recovered herself sufficiently from her first horror and astonishment to realise her situation. At last she spoke.

"How did you escape?" she asked. He bent lower than before, over his plate and would not look at her.

"Don't ask me," he answered shortly.

"Why did you do it?" she inquired again. Goddard laughed harshly; his voice was hoarse and cracked.

"Why did I do it!" he repeated. "Did you ever hear of any one who would not escape from prison if he had the chance? Don't look at me like that, Mary —"

"I am sorry for you," she said.

"You don't seem very glad to see me," he answered roughly. "I might have known it."

"Yes, you might have known it."

It seemed a very hard and cruel thing to say, and Mary Goddard was very far from being a cruel woman by nature; but she was stunned by fear and disgust and horrified by the possibilities of harm suddenly brought before her.

Goddard pushed his plate away and leaned his elbows upon the table supporting his chin in his hands. He scowled at her defiantly.

"You have given me a warm reception, after nearly three years of — separation." There was a bitter sneer in the word.

"I am horrified to see you here," she said simply. "You know very well that I cannot conceal you —"

"Oh, I don't expect miracles," said Goddard contemptuously. "I don't know that, when I came here, I expected to cause you any particularly agree-

able sensation. I confess, when a woman has not seen her beloved husband for three years, one might expect her to show a little feeling — "

"I will do what I can for you, Walter," said his wife, whose unnatural calm was fast yielding to an overpowering agitation.

"Then give me fifty pounds and tell me the nearest way east," answered the convict savagely.

"I have not got fifty pounds in the house," protested Mary Goddard, in some alarm. "I never keep much money — I can get it for you — "

"I have a great mind to look," returned her husband suspiciously. "How soon can you get it?"

"To-morrow night — the time to get a cheque cashed — "

"So you keep a banker's account?"

"Of course. But a cheque would be of no use to you — I wish it were!"

"Naturally you do. You would get rid of me at once." Suddenly his voice changed. "Oh, Mary — you used to love me!" cried the wretched man, burying his face in his hands.

"I was very wrong," answered his wife, looking away from him. "You did not deserve it — you never did."

"Because I was unfortunate!"

"Unfortunate!" repeated Mary Goddard with rising scorn. "Unfortunate — when you were deceiving me every day of your life. I could have forgiven a great deal — Walter — but not that, not that!"

"What? About the money?" he asked with sudden fierceness.

"The money — no. Even though you were disgraced and convicted, Walter, I would have forgiven

that, I would have tried to see you, to comfort you. I should have been sorry for you; I would have done what I could to help you. But I could not forgive you the rest; I never can."

"Bah! I never cared for her," said the convict. But under his livid skin there rose a faint blush of shame.

"You never cared for me — that is the reason I — I am not glad to see you — "

"I did, Mary. Upon my soul I did. I love you still!" He rose and came near to his wife, and again he would have put his arm around her. But she sprang to her feet with an angry light in her eyes.

"If you dare to touch me, I will give you up!" she cried. Goddard shrank back to his chair, very pale and trembling violently.

"You would not do that, Mary," he almost whined. But she remained standing, looking at him very menacingly.

"Indeed I would — you don't know me," she said, between her teeth.

"You are as hard as a stone," he answered, sullenly, and for some minutes there was silence between them.

"I suppose you are going to turn me out into the rain again?" asked the convict.

"You cannot stay here — you are not safe for a minute. You will have to go. You must come back to-morrow and I will give you the money. You had better go now — "

"Oh, Mary, I would not have thought it of you," moaned Goddard.

"Why — what else can I do? I cannot let you sleep in the house — I have no barn. If any one saw you here it would be all over. People know about it — "

"What people?"

"The vicar and his wife and Mr. Juxon at the Hall."

"Mr. Juxon? What is he like? Would he give me up if he knew?"

"I think he would," said Mary Goddard, thoughtfully. "I am almost sure he would. He is the justice of the peace here — he would be bound to."

"Do you know him?" Goddard thought he detected a slight nervousness in his wife's manner.

"Very well. This house belongs to him."

"Oh!" ejaculated the convict. "I begin to see."

"Yes — you see you had better go," said his wife innocently. "How can you manage to come here to-morrow? You cannot go on without the money — "

"No — and I don't mean to," he answered roughly. Money was indeed an absolute necessity to him. "Give me what you have got in the house, anyhow. You may think better of it to-morrow. I don't trust people of your stamp."

Mary Goddard rose without a word and left the room. When she was gone the convict set himself to finish the jug of ale she had brought, and looked about him. He saw objects that reminded him of his former home. He examined the fork with which he had eaten and remembered the pattern and the engraved initials as he turned it over in his hand. The very table itself had belonged to his house — the carpet beneath his feet, the chair upon which he sat. It all seemed too unnatural to be true. That very night, that very hour, he must go forth again into the wild February weather and hide himself, leaving all these things behind him; leaving behind too his wife, the woman he had so bitterly injured, but who was still

his wife. It seemed impossible. Surely he might stay if he pleased; it was not true that detectives were on his track — it was all a dream, since that dreadful day when he had written that name, which was not his, upon a piece of paper. He had waked up and was again at home. But he started as he heard a footstep in the passage, being now accustomed to start at sounds which suggested pursuit; he started and he felt the wet smock-frock, which was his disguise, clinging to him as he moved, and the reality of the present returned to him with awful force. His wife again entered the room.

"There are over nine pounds," she said. "It is all I have." She laid the money upon the table before him and remained standing. "You shall have the rest to-morrow," she added.

"Can't I see Nellie?" he asked suddenly. It was the first time he had spoken of his child. Mrs. Goddard hesitated.

"No," she said at last. "You cannot see her now. She must not be told; she thinks you are dead. You may catch a glimpse of her to-morrow — "

"Well — it is better she should not know, I suppose. You could not explain."

"No, Walter, I could not — explain. Come later to-morrow night — to the same window. I will undo the shutters and give you the money." Mary Goddard was almost overcome with exhaustion. It was a terrible struggle to maintain her composure under such circumstances; but necessity does wonders. "Where will you sleep to-night?" she asked presently. She pitied the wretch from her heart, though she longed to see him leave her house.

"I will get into the stables of some public-house.

I pass for a tramp." There was a terrible earnestness in the simple statement, which did more to make Mary Goddard realise her husband's position than anything else could have done. To people who live in the country the word "tramp" means so much.

"Poor Walter!" said Mrs. Goddard softly, and for the first time since she had seen him the tears stood in her eyes.

"Don't waste your pity on me," he answered. "Let me be off."

There was half a loaf and some cheese left upon the table. Mrs. Goddard put them together and offered them to him.

"You had better take it," she said. He took the food readily enough and hid it under his frock. He knew the value of it. Then he got upon his feet. He moved painfully, for the cold and the wet had stiffened his limbs already weakened with hunger and exhaustion.

"Let me be off," he said again, and moved towards the door. His wife followed him in silence. In the passage he paused again.

"Well, Mary," he said, "I suppose I ought to be grateful to you for not giving me up to the police."

"You know very well," answered Mrs. Goddard, "that what I can do to save you, I will do. You know that."

"Then do it, and don't forget the money. It's hanging this time if I'm caught."

Mrs. Goddard uttered a low cry and leaned against the wall.

"What?" she faltered. "You have not—"

"I believe I killed somebody in getting away,"

answered the felon with a grim laugh. Then, without her assistance, he opened the door and went out into the pouring rain. The door shut behind him and Mary Goddard heard his retreating footsteps on the path outside. When he was fairly gone she suddenly broke down, and falling upon her knees in the passage beat her forehead against the wall in an agony of despair.

Murderer — thief, forger and murderer, too! It was more than she could bear. Even now he was within a stone's throw of her house; a moment ago he had been here, beside her — there beyond, too, in the dining-room, sitting opposite to her at her own table as he had sat in his days of innocence and honour for many a long year before his crime. In the sudden necessity of acting, in the unutterable surprise of finding herself again face to face with him, she had been calm; now that he was gone she felt as though she must go mad. She asked herself if this filthy tramp, this branded villain, was the husband she had loved and cherished for years, whose beauty she had admired, whose hand she had held so often, whose lips she had kissed — if this was the father of her lovely child. It was all over now. There was blood upon his hands as well as other guilt. If he were caught he must die, or at the very least be imprisoned for life. He could never again be free to come forth after the expiation of his crimes and to claim her and his child. If he escaped now, it must be to live in a distant country under a perpetual disguise. If he were caught, the news of his capture would be in all the papers, the news of his trial for murder, the very details of his execution. The Ambroses would know and the squire, even the country

folk, would perhaps at last know the truth about her. Life even in the quiet spot she had chosen would become intolerable, and she would be obliged to go forth again into a more distant exile. She bitterly repented having written to her husband in his prison to tell him where she was settled. It would have been sufficient to acquaint the governor with the fact, so that Goddard might know where she was when his term expired. She had never written but once, and he had perhaps not been allowed to answer the letter. His appearance at her door proved that he had received it. Would to God he had not, she thought.

There were other things besides his crime of forgery which had acted far more powerfully upon Mary Goddard's mind, and which had broken for ever all ties of affection; circumstances which had appeared during his trial and which had shown that he had not only been unfaithful to those who trusted him, but had been unfaithful to the wife who loved him. That was what she could not forgive; it was the memory of that which rose like an impassable wall between her and him, worse than his frauds, his forgery, worse almost than his murder. He had done that which even a loving woman could not pardon, that which was past all forgiveness. That was why his sudden appearance roused no tender memories, elicited seemingly so little sympathy from her. She was too good a woman to say it, but she knew in her heart that she wished him dead, the very possibility of ever seeing him again gone from her life for ever, no matter how.

But she must see him again, nevertheless, and to-morrow. To-morrow, too, she would have to

meet the squire, and appear to act and talk as though nothing had happened in this terrible night. That would be the hardest of all, perhaps; even harder than meeting her husband for a brief moment in order to give him the means of escape. She felt that in helping him she was participating in his crimes, and yet, she asked herself, what woman would have acted differently? What woman, even though she might hate her husband with her whole soul, and justly, would yet be so hard-hearted as to refuse him assistance when he was flying for his life? It would be impossible. She must help him at any cost; but it was hard to feel that she must see the squire and behave with indifference, while her husband was lurking in the neighbourhood, when a detective might at any moment come to the door, and demand to search the house.

These thoughts passed very quickly through her overwrought brain, as she knelt in the passage; kneeling because she felt she could no longer stand, the passionate tears streaming down her face, her small hands pressing her temples. Then she struggled to her feet and dried her eyes, steadying herself against the wall for a moment. She had almost forgotten little Nellie whom she had left in the drawing-room. She had told the child, when she went back to her, leaving Goddard alone in the dark, that the man was a poor starving tramp, but that she did not want Nellie to see him, because he looked so miserable. She would give him something to eat and send him away, she said, and meanwhile Nellie should sit by the drawing-room fire and wait for her. The child trusted her mother implicitly and was completely reassured. Mrs. Goddard dried her eyes,

and re-entered the room. Nellie was curled up in a big chair with a book; she looked up quickly.

"Why, mamma," she said, "you have been crying!"

"Have I, darling? I daresay it was the sight of that poor man. He was very wretched."

"Is he gone?" asked the child.

It was unusually late and Nellie was beginning to be sleepy, so that she was more easily quieted than she could have been in ordinary circumstances. It might have struck her as strange that a wandering tramp should know her mother's Christian name, as still more inexplicable that her mother should have been willing to admit such a man at so late an hour. She had been badly frightened, but trusting her mother as she did, her terror had quickly disappeared and had been quickly followed by sleepiness.

But Mrs. Goddard did not sleep that night. She felt as though she could never sleep again, and for many hours she lay thinking of the new element of fear which had so suddenly come into her life at the very time when she believed herself to be safe for many years to come. She longed to know where her wretched husband was; whether he had found shelter for the night, whether he was still free or whether he had even then fallen into the hands of his pursuers. She knew that she could not have concealed him in the house and that she had done all that lay in her power for him. But she started at every sound, as the rain rattled against the shutters and the wind howled down the chimney.

Walter Goddard, however, was safe for the present and was even luxuriously lodged, considering his circumstances, for he was comfortably installed amongst

the hay in the barn of the "Feathers" inn. He had been in Billingsfield since early in the afternoon and had considered carefully the question of his quarters for the night. He had observed from a distance the landlord of the said inn, and had boldly offered to do a "day's work for a night's lodging." He said he was "tramping" his way back from London to his home in Yorkshire; he knew enough of the sound of the rough Yorkshire dialect to pass for a native of that county amongst ignorant labourers who had never heard the real tongue. The landlord of the Feathers consented to the bargain and Goddard was told that he might sleep in the barn if he liked, and should take a turn at cutting chaff the next day to pay for the convenience. The convict slept soundly; he was past lying awake in useless fits of remorse, and he was exhausted with his day's journey. Moreover he had now the immediate prospect of obtaining sufficient money to carry him safely out of the country, and once abroad he felt sure of baffling pursuit. He was an accomplished man and spoke French with a fluency unusual in Englishmen; he determined to get across the channel in some fishing craft; he would then make his way to Paris and enlist in the Foreign Legion. It would be safer than trying to go to America, where people were invariably caught as they landed. It was a race for life and death, and he knew it. Had he been able to obtain clothes, money and a disguise in London he would have travelled by rail. But that had been impossible and it now seemed a wiser plan to "tramp" it. His beard was growing rapidly and would soon make a complete disguise. Village constables are generally simple people, easily imposed upon, very

different from London detectives; and hitherto he felt sure that he had baffled pursuit by the mere simplicity of his proceedings. The intelligent officials of Scotland Yard were used to forgers and swindlers who travelled by express trains and crossed to America by fashionable steamers. It did not strike them as very likely that a man of Walter Goddard's previous tastes and habits could get through the country in the guise of a tramp. If he had been possessed at the time of his escape of the money he so much desired he would probably have been caught; as it was, he got away without difficulty, and at the very time when every railway station and every port in the kingdom were being watched for him, he was lurking in the purlieus of Whitechapel, and then tramping his way east in comparative safety, half starved, it is true, but unmolested.

That he was disappointed at the reception his wife had given him did not prevent him from sleeping peacefully that night. One thing alone disturbed him, and that was her mention of Mr. Juxon, in whose house, as she had told him, she lived. It seems incredible that a man in Walter Goddard's position, lost to every sense of honour, a criminal of the worst type, who had deceived his wife before he was indicted for forgery, who had certainly cared very little for her at any time, should now, in a moment of supreme danger, feel a pang of jealousy on hearing that his wife lived in the vicinity of the squire and occupied a house belonging to him. But he was too bad himself not to suspect others, especially those whom he had wronged, and the feeling was mingled with a strong curiosity to know whether this woman, who now treated him so haughtily and drew back from

him as from some monstrous horror, was as good as she pretended to be. He said to himself that on the next day at dawn he would slip out of the barn and try whether he could not find some hiding-place within easy reach of the cottage, so as to be able to watch her dwelling at his ease throughout the day. The plan seemed a good one. Since he was obliged to wait twenty-four hours in order to get the money he wanted, he might as well employ the time profitably in observing his wife's habits. It would be long, he said to himself with a bitter sneer, before he troubled her again — he would just like to see.

Having come to this decision he drew some of the hay over his body and in spite of cold and wet was soon peacefully asleep. But at early dawn he awoke with the alacrity of a man who constantly expects pursuit, and slipped down from the hayloft into the barn. There was no one stirring and he got over the fence at the back of the yard and skirted the fields in the direction of the church, finally climbing another stile and entering what he supposed to be the park. On this side the back of the church ran out into a broad meadow, where the larger portion of the ancient abbey had once stood. Goddard walked along close by the church walls. He knew from his observation on the previous afternoon that he could thus come out into the road in the vicinity of the cottage, unless his way through the park were interrupted by impassable wire fences. The ground was very heavy and he was sure not to meet anybody in the meadows in such weather.

Suddenly he stopped and looked at a buttress that jutted out from the church and for the existence of which there seemed to be no ostensible reason. He

examined it and found that it was not a buttress but apparently a half ruined chamber, which at some former period had been built upon the side of the abbey. Low down by the ground there was a hole, where a few stones seemed to have been removed and not replaced. Goddard knelt down in the long wet grass and put in his head; then he crept in on his hands and knees and presently disappeared.

He found himself in a room about ten feet square, dimly lighted by a small window at the top, and surrounded by long horizontal niches. The floor, which was badly broken in some places, was of stone. Goddard examined the place carefully. It was evidently an old vault of the kind formerly built above ground for the lords of the manor; but the coffins, if there had ever been any, had been removed elsewhere. Goddard laughed to himself.

"I might stay here for a year, if I could get anything to eat," he said to himself.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE squire had grown used to the position in which he found himself after Mary Goddard had told him her story. He continued his visits as formerly, and it could hardly be said that there was any change in his manner towards her; there was no need of any change, for even at the time when he contemplated making her his wife there had been nothing lover-like in his behaviour. He had been a friend and had treated her with all the respect due to a lonely lady who was his tenant, and even with a certain formality which had sometimes seemed unnecessary. But though there was no apparent alteration in his mode of talking, in his habit of bringing her flowers and books and of looking after the condition of the cottage, both she and he were perfectly conscious of the fact that they understood each other much better than before. They were united by the common bond of a common secret which very closely concerned one of them. Things were not as they had formerly been. Mrs. Goddard no longer felt that she had anything to hide; the squire knew that he no longer had anything to hope. If he had been a selfish man, if she had been a less sensible woman, their friendship might have ended then and there. But Mr. Juxon was not selfish, and Mary Goddard did not lack good sense. Having ascertained that in the ordinary course of events there was no possibility of ever

marrying her, the squire did not at once give her over and go elsewhere; on the contrary he showed himself more desirous than ever of assisting her and amusing her. He was a patient man; his day might come yet, if Goddard died. It did not follow that if he could not marry Mrs. Goddard he must needs marry some one else; for it was not a wife that he sought, but the companionship of this particular woman as his wife. If he could not marry he could still enjoy at least a portion of that companionship, by visiting her daily and talking with her, and making himself a part of her life. He judged things very coldly and lost himself in no lofty flights of imagination. It was better that he should enjoy what fell in his way in at least seeing Mrs. Goddard and possessing her friendship, than that he should go out of his course in order to marry merely for the sake of marrying. He had seen so much of the active side of life that he was well prepared to revel in the peace which had fallen to his lot. He cared little whether he left an heir to the park; there were others of the name, and since the park had furnished matter for litigation during forty years before he came into possession of it, it might supply the lawyers with fees for forty years more after his death, for all he cared. It would have been very desirable to marry Mrs. Goddard if it had been possible, but since the thing could not be done at present it was best to submit with a good grace. Since the day when his suit had suddenly come to grief in the discovery of her real position, Mr. Juxon had philosophically said to himself that he had perhaps been premature in making his proposal, and that it was as well that it could not have been accepted; perhaps she would not have made him

a good wife; perhaps he had deceived himself in thinking that because he liked her and desired her friendship he really wished to marry her; perhaps all was for the best in the best of all possible worlds, after all and in spite of all.

But these reflections, which tended to soothe the squire's annoyance at the failure of a scheme which he had contemplated with so much delight, did not prevent him from feeling the most sincere sympathy for Mrs. Goddard, nor from constantly wishing that he could devise some plan for helping her. She seemed never to have thought of divorcing herself from her husband. The squire was not sure whether such a thing were possible; he doubted it, and promised himself that he would get a lawyer's opinion upon the matter. He believed that English law did not grant divorces on account of the husband's being sentenced to any limited period of penal servitude. But in any case it would be a very delicate subject to approach, and Mr. Juxon amused himself by constructing conversations in his mind which should lead up to this point without wounding poor Mrs. Goddard's sensibilities. He was the kindest of men; he would not for worlds have said a word which should recall to her that memorable day when she had told him her story. And yet it would be quite impossible to broach such a scheme without going at once into all the details of the chief cause of her sorrows. The consequence was that in the windings of his imagination the squire found himself perpetually turning in a vicious circle; but since the exercise concerned Mrs. Goddard and her welfare it was not uncongenial. He founded all his vague hopes upon one expression she had used. When in making his

proposal he had spoken of her as being a widow, she had said, "Would to God that I were!" She had said it with such vehemence that he had felt sure that if she had indeed been a widow her answer to himself would have been favourable. Men easily retain such impressions received in moments of great excitement, and found hopes upon them.

So the days had gone by and the squire had thought much but had come to no conclusion. On the morning when Walter Goddard crept into the disused vault at the back of the church, the squire awoke from his sleep at his usual early hour. He was not in a very good humour, if so equable a man could be said to be subject to such weaknesses as humours. The weather was very depressing — day after day brought only more rain, more wind, more mud, more of everything disagreeable. The previous evening had been unusually dull. He was never weary of being with Mary Goddard, but occasionally, when the Ambroses were present, the conversation became oppressive. Mr. Juxon almost wished that John Short would come back and cause a diversion. His views concerning John had undergone some change since he had discovered that nobody could marry Mrs. Goddard because she was married already. He believed he could watch John's efforts to attract her attention with indifference now, or if without indifference with a charitable forbearance. John at least would help to make conversation, and the conversation on the previous evening had been intolerably wearisome. Almost unconsciously, since the chief interest and hope of his daily life had been removed the squire began to long for a change; he had been a wanderer by profession during thirty

years of his life and he was perhaps not yet old enough to settle into that absolute indifference to novelty which seems to characterise retired sailors.

But as he brushed his smooth hair and combed his beard that morning, neither change nor excitement were very far from him. He looked over his dressing-glass at the leafless oaks of the park, at the grey sky and the driving rain and he wished something would happen. He wished somebody might die and leave a great library to be sold, that he might indulge his favourite passion; he wished he had somebody stopping in the Hall — he almost decided to send and ask the vicar to come to lunch and have a day among the books. As he entered the breakfast-room at precisely half-past eight o'clock, according to his wont, the butler informed him that Mr. Gall, the village constable, was below and wanted to see him after breakfast. He received the news in silence and sat down to eat his breakfast and read the morning paper. Gall had probably come about some petty summons, or to ask what he should do about the small boys who threw stones at the rooks and broke the church windows. After finishing his meal and his paper in the leisurely manner peculiar to country gentlemen who have nothing to do, the squire rang the bell, sent for the policeman and went into his study, a small room adjoining the library.

Thomas Gall, constable, was a tall fair man with a mild eye and a cheerful face. Goodwill towards men and plentiful good living had done their work in eradicating from the good man all that stern element which might have been most useful to him in his career, not to say useful to the State. Each rolling year was pricked in his leathern belt with a new

hole as his heart grew more peaceful and his body throve. He had a goodly girth and weighed full fifteen stone in his uniform; his mild blue eye had inspired confidence in a maiden of Billingsfield parish and Mrs. Gall was now rearing a numerous family of little Galls, all perhaps destined to become mild-eyed and portly village constables in their turn.

The squire, who was not destitute of a sense of humour, never thought of Mr. Gall without a smile, so much out of keeping did the man's occupation seem with his jovial humour. Mr. Gall, he said, was the kind of policeman who would bribe a refractory tramp to move on by the present of a pint of beer. But Gall had a good point. He was very proud of his profession, and in the exercise of it he showed a discretion which, if it was the better part of his valour, argued unlimited natural courage. It was a secret profession, he was wont to say, and a man who could not keep a secret would never do for a constable. He shrouded his ways in an amiable mystery and walked a solitary beat on fine nights; when the nights were not fine there was nobody to see whether he walked his beat or not. Probably, he faithfully fulfilled his obligations; but his constitution seemed to bear exposure to the weather wonderfully well. Whether he ever saw anything worth mentioning upon those lonely walks of his, is uncertain; at all events he never mentioned anything he saw, unless it was in the secrecy of the reports he was supposed to transmit from time to time to his superiors.

On the present occasion as he entered the study, the squire observed with surprise that he looked grave. He had never witnessed such a phenomenon

before and argued that it was just possible that something of real importance might have occurred.

"Good morning, sir," said Mr. Gall, approaching the squire respectfully, after carefully closing the door behind him.

"Good morning, Gall. Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Not yet, sir. I hope not, sir. Only a little matter of business, Mr. Juxon. In point of fact, sir, I wished to consult you."

"Yes," said the squire who was used to the constable's method of circumlocution. "Yes — what is it?"

"Well, sir — it's this," said the policeman, running his thumb round the inside of his belt as though to test the pressure, and clearing his throat. "There has been a general order sent down to be on the look-out, sir. So I thought it would be best to take your opinion."

"My opinion," said the squire with great gravity, "is that if you are directed to be on the look-out, you should be on the look-out; by all means. What are you to be on the look-out for?"

"In point of fact, sir," said the constable, lowering his voice, "we are informed that a criminal has escaped from Portland. I never heard of a convict getting out of that strong'old o' the law, sir, and I would like to have your opinion upon it."

"But if you are informed that some one has escaped," remarked the squire, "you had better take it for granted that it is true."

"Juss so, sir. But the circumstances wasn't communicated to us, sir; so we don't know."

Mr. Gall paused, and the squire smoothed his hair a little.

"Well, Gall," said Mr. Juxon, "have you any reason for believing that this escaped convict is likely to come this way?"

"Well sir, there is some evidence," answered the policeman, mysteriously. "Leastways what seems like evidence to me, sir."

"Of what kind?" the squire fixed his quiet eyes on Mr. Gall's face.

"His name, sir. The name of the convict. There is a party of that name residin' here."

The squire suddenly guessed what was coming, or at least a possibility of it crossed his mind. If Mr. Gall had been a more observant man he would have seen that Mr. Juxon grew a shade paler and changed one leg over the other as he sat. But in that moment he had time to nerve himself for the worst.

"And what is the name, if you please?" he asked calmly.

"The name in the general orders is Goddard, sir — Walter Goddard. He was convicted of forgery three years ago, sir, a regular bad lot. But discretion is recommended in the orders, sir, as the business is not wanted to get into the papers."

The squire was ready. If Gall did not know that Mary Goddard was the wife of the convict Walter, he should certainly not find it out. In any other country of Europe that would have been the first fact communicated to the local police. Very likely, thought Mr. Juxon, nobody knew it.

"I do not see," he said very slowly, "that the fact of there being a Mrs. Goddard residing here in the least proves that she is any relation to this criminal. The name is not so uncommon as that, you know."

"Nor I either, sir. In point of fact, sir, I was

only thinking. It's what you may call a striking coincidence, that's all."

"It would have been a still more striking coincidence if his name had been Juxon like mine, or Ambrose like the vicar's," said the squire calmly. "There are other people of the name in England, and the local policemen will be warned to be on the look-out. If this fellow was called Juxon instead of Goddard, Gall, would you be inclined to think he was a relation of mine?"

"Oh no, sir. Ha! ha! Very good sir! Very good indeed! No indeed, sir, and she such a real lady too!"

"Well then, I do not see that you can do anything more than keep a sharp look-out. I suppose they sent you some kind of description?"

"Well, yes. There was a kind of a description as you say, sir, but I'm not anyways sure of recognising the party by it. In point of fact, sir, the description says the convict is a fair man."

"Is that all?"

"Neither particular tall, nor yet particular short, sir. Not a very big 'un nor a very little 'un, sir. In point of fact, sir, a fair man. Clean shaved and close cropped he is, sir, being a criminal."

"I hope you may recognise him by that account," said the squire, suppressing a smile. "I don't believe I should."

"Well, sir, it does say as he's a fair man," remarked the constable.

"Supposing he blacked his face and passed for a chimney-sweep?" suggested the squire. The idea seemed to unsettle Gall's views.

"In that case, sir, I don't know as I should know him, for certain," he answered.

"Probably not — probably not, Gall. And judging from the account they have sent you I don't think you would be to blame."

"Leastways it can't be said as I've failed to carry out superior instructions," replied Mr. Gall, proudly. "Then it's your opinion, sir, that I'd better keep a sharp look-out? Did I understand you to say so, sir?"

"Quite so," returned the squire with great calmness. "By all means keep a sharp look-out, and be careful to be discreet, as the orders instruct you."

"You may trust me for that, sir," said the policeman, who dearly loved the idea of mysterious importance. "Then I wish you good morning, sir." He prepared to go.

"Good morning, Gall — good morning. The butler will give you some ale."

Again Mr. Gall passed his thumb round the inside of his belt, testing the local pressure in anticipation of a pint. He made a sort of half-military salute at the door and went out. When the squire was alone he rose from his chair and paced the room, giving way to the agitation he had concealed in the presence of the constable. He was very much disturbed at the news of Goddard's escape, as well he might be. Not that he was aware that the convict knew of his wife's whereabouts; he did not even suppose that Goddard could ascertain for some time where she was living, still less that he would boldly present himself in Billingsfield. But it was bad enough to know that the man was again at large. So long as he was safely lodged in prison, Mrs. Goddard was herself safe; but if once he regained his liberty and baffled the police he would certainly end by finding out Mary's address and there was no telling to what

annoyance, to what danger, to what sufferings she might be exposed. Here was a new interest, indeed, and one which promised to afford the squire occupation until the fellow was caught.

Mr. Juxon knew that he was right in putting the policeman off the track in regard to Mrs. Goddard. He himself was a better detective than Gall, for he went daily to the cottage and if anything was wrong there, was quite sure to discover it. If Goddard ever made his way to Billingsfield it could only be for the purpose of seeing his wife, and if he succeeded in this, Mrs. Goddard could not conceal it from the squire. She was a nervous woman who could not hide her emotions; she would find herself in a terrible difficulty and she would perhaps turn to her friend for assistance. If Mr. Juxon could lay his hands on Goddard, he flattered himself he was much more able to arrest a desperate man than mild-eyed Policeman Gall. He had not been at sea for thirty years in vain, and in his time he had handled many a rough customer. He debated however upon the course he should pursue. As in his opinion it was unlikely that Goddard would find out his wife for some time, and improbable that he would waste such precious time in looking for her, it seemed far from advisable to warn her that the felon had escaped. On the other hand he mistrusted his own judgment; if she were not prepared it was just possible that the man should come upon her unawares, and the shock of seeing him might be very much worse than the shock of being told that he was at large. He might consult the vicar.

At first, the old feeling that it would be disloyal to Mrs. Goddard even to hint to Mr. Ambrose that

he was acquainted with her story withheld him from pursuing such a course. But as he turned the matter over in his mind it seemed to him that since it was directly for her good, he would now be justified in speaking. He liked the vicar and he trusted him. He knew that the vicar had been a good friend to Mrs. Goddard and that he would stand by her in any difficulty so far as he might be able. The real question was how to make sure that the vicar should not tell his wife. If Mrs. Ambrose had the least suspicion that anything unusual was occurring, she would naturally try and extract information from her husband, and she would probably be successful; women, the squire thought, very generally succeed in operations of that kind. But if once Mr. Ambrose could be consulted without arousing his wife's suspicions, he was a man to be trusted. Thereupon Mr. Juxon wrote a note to the vicar, saying that he had something of great interest to show him, and begging that, if not otherwise engaged, he would come up to the Hall to lunch. When he had despatched his messenger, being a man of his word, he went into the library to hunt for some rare volume or manuscript which the vicar had not yet seen, and which might account in a spirit of rigid veracity for the excuse he had given. Meanwhile, as he turned over his rare and curious folios he debated further upon his conduct; but having once made up his mind to consult Mr. Ambrose, he determined to tell him boldly what had occurred, after receiving from him a promise of secrecy. The messenger brought back word that the vicar would be delighted to come, and at the hour named the sound of wheels upon the gravel announced the arrival of Strawberry, the old

mare, drawing behind her the vicar and his aged henchman, Reynolds, in the traditional vicarage dog-cart. A moment later the vicar entered the library.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Ambrose," said the squire in hospitable tones. "I have something to show you and I have something to say to you." The two shook hands heartily. Independently of kindred scholarly tastes, they were sympathetic to each other and were always glad to meet.

"It is just the weather for bookworms," answered the vicar in cheerful tones. "Dear me, I never come here without envying you and wishing that life were one long rainy afternoon."

"You know I am inclined to think I am rather an enviable person," said Mr. Juxon, slowly passing his hand over his glossy hair and leading his guest towards a large table near the fire. Several volumes lay together upon the polished mahogany. The squire laid his hand on one of them.

"I have not deceived you," he said. "That is a very interesting volume. It is the black letter Paracelsus I once spoke of. I have succeeded in getting it at last."

"Dear me! What a piece of fortune!" said Mr. Ambrose bending down until his formidable nose almost touched the ancient page.

"Yes," said the squire, "uncommonly lucky as usual. Now, excuse my abruptness in changing the subject — I want to consult you upon an important matter."

The vicar looked up quickly with that vague, far-away expression which comes into the eyes of a student when he is suddenly called away from contemplating some object of absorbing interest.

"Certainly," he said, "certainly — a — by all means."

"It is about Mrs. Goddard," said the squire, looking hard at his visitor. "Of course it is between ourselves," he added.

The vicar's long upper lip descended upon its fellow and he bent his rough grey eyebrows, returning Mr. Juxon's sharp look with interest. He could not imagine what the squire could have to say about Mrs. Goddard, unless, like poor John, he had fallen in love with her and wanted to marry her; which appeared improbable.

"What is it?" he said sharply.

"I daresay you do not know that I am acquainted with her story," began Mr. Juxon. "Do not be surprised. She saw fit to tell it me herself."

"Indeed?" exclaimed the vicar in considerable astonishment. In that case, he argued quickly, Mr. Juxon was not thinking of marrying her.

"Yes — it is not necessary to go into that," said Mr. Juxon quickly. "The thing I want to tell you is this — Goddard the forger has escaped — "

"Escaped?" echoed the vicar in real alarm. "You don't mean to say so!"

"Gall the constable came here this morning," continued Mr. Juxon. "He told me that there were general orders out for his arrest."

"How in the world did he get out?" cried the vicar. "I thought nobody was ever known to escape from Portland!"

"So did I. But this fellow has — somehow. Gall did not know. Now, the question is, what is to be done?"

"I am sure I don't know," returned the vicar,

thrusting his hands into his pockets and marching to the window, the wide skirts of his coat seeming to wave with agitation as he walked.

Mr. Juxon also put his hands into his pockets, but he stood still upon the hearth-rug and looked at the ceiling, softly whistling a little tune, a habit he had in moments of great anxiety. For three or four minutes neither of the two spoke.

"Would you tell Mrs. Goddard — or not?" asked Mr. Juxon at last.

"I don't know," said the vicar. "I am amazed beyond measure." He turned and slowly came back to the table.

"I don't know either," replied the squire. "That is precisely the point upon which I think we ought to decide. I have known about the story for some time, but I did not anticipate that it would take this turn."

"I think," said Mr. Ambrose after another pause, "I think that if there is any likelihood of the fellow finding her out, we ought to tell her. If not I think we had better wait until he is caught. He is sure to be caught, of course."

"I entirely agree with you," returned Mr. Juxon. "Only — how on earth are we to find out whether he is likely to come here or not? If any one knows where he is, he is as good as caught already. If nobody knows, we can certainly have no means of telling."

The argument was unanswerable. Again there was a long silence. The vicar walked about the room in great perplexity.

"Dear me! Dear me! What a terrible business!" he repeated, over and over again.

"Do you think we are called upon to do anything?" he asked at last, stopping in his walk immediately in front of Mr. Juxon.

"If we can do anything to save Mrs. Goddard from annoyance or further trouble, we are undoubtedly called upon to do it," replied the squire. "If that wretch finds her out, he will try to break into the cottage at night and force her to give him money."

"Do you really think so? Dear me! I hope he will do no such thing!"

"So do I, I am sure," said Mr. Juxon, with a grim smile. "But if he finds her out, he will. I almost think it would be better to tell her in any case."

"But think of the anxiety she will be in until he is caught!" cried the vicar. "She will be expecting him every day — every night. Well — I suppose we might tell Gall to watch the house."

"That will not do," said Mr. Juxon firmly. "It would be a great injustice to allow Gall or any of the people in the village to know anything about her. She might be subjected to all kinds of insult. You know what these people are. A 'real lady,' who is at the same time the wife of a convict, is a thing they can hardly understand. I am sure both you and I secretly flatter ourselves that we have shown an unusual amount of good sense and generosity in understanding her position as we do."

"I daresay we do," said the vicar with a smile. He was too honest to deny it. "Indeed it took me some time to get used to the idea myself."

"Precisely. The village people would never get used to it. Of all things to do, we should certainly not tell Gall, who is an old woman and a great chatterbox. I wish you could have heard his statement

this morning — it filled me with admiration for the local police, I assure you. But — I think it would be better to tell her. I did not think so before you came, I believe. But talking always brings the truth out."

The vicar hesitated, rising and falling upon his toes and heels in profound thought, after his manner.

"I daresay you are right," he said at last. "Will you do it? Or shall I?"

"I would rather not," said the squire, thoughtfully. "You know her better, you have known her much longer than I."

"But she will ask me where I heard of it," objected the vicar. "I shall be obliged to say that you told me. That will be as bad as though you told her yourself."

"You need not say you heard it from me. You can say that Gall has received instructions to look out for Goddard. She will not question you any further, I am sure."

"I would much rather that you told her, Mr. Juxon," said the vicar.

"I would much rather that you told her, Mr. Ambrose," said the squire, almost in the same breath. Both laughed a little.

"Not that I would not do it at once, if necessary," added Mr. Juxon.

"Or I, in a moment," said Mr. Ambrose.

"Of course," returned Mr. Juxon. "Only it is such a very delicate matter, you see."

"Dear me, yes," murmured the vicar, "a most delicate matter. Poor lady!"

"Poor lady!" echoed the squire. "But I suppose it must be done."

"Oh yes — we cannot do otherwise," answered Mr. Ambrose, still hoping that his companion would volunteer to perform the disagreeable office.

"Well then, will you — will you do it?" asked Mr. Juxon, anxious to have the matter decided.

"Why not go together?" suggested the vicar.

"No," said Mr. Juxon firmly. "It would be an intolerable ordeal for the poor woman. I think I see your objection. Perhaps you think that Mrs. Ambrose — "

"Exactly, Mrs. Ambrose," echoed the vicar with a grim smile.

"Oh precisely — then I will do it," said the squire. And he forthwith did, and was very much surprised at the result.

CHAPTER XV.

It was late in the afternoon when Mr. Juxon walked down towards the cottage, accompanied by the vicar. In spite of their mutual anxiety to be of service to Mrs. Goddard, when they had once decided how to act they had easily fallen into conversation about other matters, the black letter Paracelsus had received its full share of attention and many another rare volume had been brought out and examined. Neither the vicar nor his host believed that there was any hurry; if Goddard ever succeeded in getting to Billingsfield it would not be to-day, nor to-morrow either.

The weather had suddenly changed; the east was already clear and over the west, where the sun was setting in a fiery mist, the huge clouds were banked up against the bright sky, fringed with red and purple, but no longer threatening rain or snow. The air was sharp and the plentiful mud in the roads was already crusted with a brittle casing of ice.

The squire took leave of Mr. Ambrose at the turning where the road led into the village and then walked back to the cottage. Even his solid nerves were a little unsettled at the prospect of the interview before him; but he kept a stout heart and asked for Mrs. Goddard in his usual quiet voice. Martha told him that Mrs. Goddard had a bad headache, but on inquiry found that she would see the squire. He

entered the drawing-room softly and went forward to greet her; she was sitting in a deep chair propped by cushions.

Mary Goddard had spent a miserable day. The grey morning light seemed to reveal her troubles and fears in a new and more terrible aspect. During the long hours of darkness it seemed as though those things were mercifully hidden which the strong glare of day must inevitably reveal, and when the night was fairly past she thought all the world must surely know that Walter Goddard had escaped and that his wife had seen him. Hourly she expected a ringing at the bell, announcing the visit of a party of detectives on his track; every sound startled her and her nerves were strung to such a pitch that she heard with supernatural acuteness. She had indeed two separate causes for fear. The one was due to her anxiety for Goddard's safety; the other to her apprehensions for Nellie. She had long determined that at all hazards the child must be kept from the knowledge of her father's disgrace, by being made to believe in his death. It was a falsehood indeed, but such a falsehood as may surely be forgiven to a woman as unhappy as Mary Goddard. It seemed monstrous that the innocent child, who seemed not even to have inherited her father's looks or temper, should be brought up with the perpetual sense of her disgrace before her, should be forced to listen to explanations of her father's crimes and tutored to the comprehension of an inherited shame. From the first Mary Goddard had concealed the whole matter from the little girl, and when Walter was at last convicted, she had told her that her father was dead. Dead he might be, she thought, before twelve years were out,

and Nellie would be none the wiser. In twelve years from the time of his conviction Nellie would be in her twenty-first year; if it were ever necessary to tell her, it would be time enough then, for the girl would have at least enjoyed her youth, free of care and of the horrible consciousness of a great crime hanging over her head. No child could grow up in such a state as that implied. No mind could develop healthily under the perpetual pressure of so hideous a secret; from her earliest childhood her impressions would be warped, her imagination darkened and her mental growth stunted. It would be a great cruelty to tell her the truth; it was a great mercy to tell her the falsehood. It was no selfish timidity which had prompted Mary Goddard, but a carefully weighed consideration for the welfare of her child.

If now, within these twenty-four hours, Nellie should discover who the poor tramp was, who had frightened her so much on the previous evening, all this would be at an end. The child's life would be made desolate for ever. She would never recover from the shock, and to injure lovely Nellie so bitterly would be worse to Mary Goddard than to be obliged to bear the sharpest suffering herself. For, from the day when she had waked to a comprehension of her husband's baseness, the love for her child had taken in her breast the place of the love for Walter.

She did not think connectedly; she did not realise her fears; she was almost wholly unstrung. But she had procured the fifty pounds her husband required and she waited for the night with a dull hope that all might yet be well — as well as anything so horrible could be. If only her husband were not caught in Billingsfield it would not be so bad, perhaps.

And yet it may be that her wisest course would have been to betray him that very night. Many just men would have said so; but there are few women who would do it. There are few indeed, so stony-hearted as to betray a man once loved in such a case; and Mary Goddard in her wildest fear never dreamed of giving up the fugitive. She sat all day in her chair, wishing that the day were over, praying that she might be spared any further suffering or that at least it might be spared to her child whom she so loved. She had sent Nellie down to the vicarage with Martha. Mrs. Ambrose loved Nellie better than she loved Nellie's mother, and there was a standing invitation for her to spend the afternoons at the vicarage. Nellie said her mother had a terrible headache and wanted to be alone.

But when the squire came Mrs. Goddard thought it wiser to see him. She had, of course, no intention of confiding to him an account of the events of the previous night, but she felt that if she could talk to him for half an hour she would be stronger. He was himself so strong and honest that he inspired her with courage. She knew, also, that if she were driven to the extremity of confiding in any one she would choose Mr. Juxon rather than Mr. Ambrose. The vicar had been her first friend and she owed him much; but the squire had won her confidence by his noble generosity after she had told him her story. She said to herself that he was more of a man than the vicar. And now he had come to her at the time of her greatest distress, and she was glad to see him.

Mr. Juxon entered the room softly, feeling that he was in the presence of a sick person. Mrs. Goddard

turned her pathetic face towards him and held out her hand.

"I am so glad to see you," she said, trying to seem cheerful.

"I fear you are ill, Mrs. Goddard," answered the squire, looking at her anxiously and then seating himself by her side. "Martha told me you had a headache — I hope it is not serious."

"Oh no — not serious. Only a headache," she said with a smile so unlike her own that Mr. Juxon began to feel nervous. His resolution to tell her his errand began to waver; it seemed cruel, he thought, to disturb a person who was evidently so ill with a matter so serious. He remembered that she had almost fainted on a previous occasion when she had spoken to him of her husband. She had not been ill then; there was no knowing what the effect of a shock to her nerves might be at present. He sat still in silence for some moments, twisting his hat upon his knee.

"Do not be disturbed about me," said Mrs. Goddard presently. "It will pass very quickly. I shall be quite well to-morrow — I hope," she added with a shudder.

"I am very much disturbed about you," returned Mr. Juxon in an unusually grave tone. Mrs. Goddard looked at him quickly, and was surprised when she saw the expression on his face. He looked sad, and at the same time perplexed.

"Oh, pray don't be!" she exclaimed as though deprecating further remark upon her ill health.

"I wish I knew," said the squire with some hesitation, "whether — whether you are really very ill. I mean, of course, I know you have a bad headache,

a very bad headache, as I can see. But — indeed, Mrs. Goddard, I have something of importance to say."

"Something of importance?" she repeated, staring hard at him.

"Yes — but it will keep till to-morrow, if you would rather not hear it now," he replied, looking at her doubtfully.

"I would rather hear it now," she answered after some seconds of silence. Her heart beat fast.

"You were good enough some time ago to tell me about — Mr. Goddard," began Mr. Juxon in woful trepidation.

"Yes," answered his companion under her breath. Her hands were clasped tightly together upon her knees and her eyes sought the squire's anxiously and then looked away again in fear.

"Well, it is about him," continued Mr. Juxon in a gentle voice. "Would you rather put it off? It is — well, rather startling."

Mrs. Goddard closed her eyes, like a person expecting to suffer some terrible pain. She thought Mr. Juxon was going to tell her that Walter had been captured in the village.

"Mr. Goddard has escaped," said the squire, making a bold plunge with the whole truth. The sick lady trembled violently, and unclasping her hands laid them upon the arms of her chair as though to steady herself to bear the worse shock to come. But Mr. Juxon was silent. He had told her all he knew.

"Yes," she said faintly. "Is there anything — anything more?" Her voice was barely audible in the still and dusky room.

"No — except that, of course, there are orders out for his arrest, all over the country."

"He has not been arrested yet?" asked Mrs. Goddard. She had expected to hear that he was caught; she thought the squire was trying to break the shock of the news. Her courage rose a little now.

"No, he is not arrested — but I have no doubt he soon will be," added Mr. Juxon in a tone intended to convey encouragement.

"How did you hear this?"

"Gall the policeman, told me this morning. I — I am afraid I have something else to confess to you, Mrs. Goddard, I trust you will not — "

"What?" she asked so suddenly as to startle him. Walter might have been heard of in the neighbourhood, perhaps.

"I think I was right," continued Mr. Juxon. "I hope you will forgive me. It does not seem quite loyal, but I did not know what to do. I consulted the vicar as to whether we should tell you."

"The vicar? What did he say?" Again Mrs. Goddard felt relieved.

"He quite agreed with me," answered the squire. "You see we feared that Mr. Goddard might find his way here and come upon you suddenly. We thought you would be terribly pained and startled."

Mrs. Goddard could almost have laughed at that moment. The excellent man had taken all this trouble in order to save her from the very thing which had already occurred on the previous night. There was a bitter humour in the situation, in the squire's kind-hearted way of breaking to her that news which she already knew so well, in his willingness to put off telling her until the morrow. What would Mr. Juxon say, could he guess that she had herself already spoken with her husband and had promised to see

him again that very night! Forgetting that his last words required an answer, she leaned back in her chair and again folded her hands before her. Her eyes were half closed and from beneath the drooping lids she gazed through the gathering gloom at the squire's anxious face.

"I hope you think I did right," said the latter in considerable doubt.

"Quite right. I think you were both very kind to think of me as you did," said she.

"I am sure, I always think of you," answered Mr. Juxon simply. "I hope that this thing will have no further consequences. Of course, until we know of Mr. Goddard's whereabouts we shall feel very anxious. It seems probable that if he can get here unobserved he will do so. He will probably ask you for some money."

"Do you really think he could get here at all?" asked Mrs. Goddard. She wanted to hear what he would say, for she thought she might judge from his words whether her husband ran any great risk.

"Oh no," replied the squire. "I think it is very improbable. I fear this news has sadly disturbed you, Mrs. Goddard, but let us hope all may turn out for the best." Indeed he thought she showed very little surprise, though she had evidently been much moved. Perhaps she had been accustomed to expect that her husband might one day escape. She was ill, too, and her nerves were unstrung, he supposed.

She had really passed through a very violent emotion, but it had not been caused by her surprise, but by her momentary fear for the fugitive, instantly allayed by Mr. Juxon's explanation. She felt that for to-day at least Walter was safe, and by to-morrow

he would be safe out of the neighbourhood. But she reflected that it was necessary to say something; that if she appeared to receive the news too indifferently the squire's suspicions might be aroused with fatal results.

"It is a terrible thing," she said presently. "You see I am not at all myself."

It was not easy for her to act a part. The words were commonplace.

"No," said Mr. Juxon, "I see you are not." He on his part, instead of looking for a stronger expression of fear or astonishment, was now only too glad that she should be so calm.

"Would you advise me to do anything?" she asked presently.

"There is nothing to be done," he answered quickly, glad of a chance to relieve the embarrassment of the situation. "Of course we might put you under the protection of the police but — what is the matter, Mrs. Goddard?" She had started as though in pain.

"Only this dreadful headache," she said. "Go on please."

"Well, we might set Gall the policeman to watch your house; but that would be very unpleasant for you. It would be like telling him and all the village people of your situation — "

"Oh don't! Please don't!"

"No, certainly not. I think it very unwise. Besides — " he stopped short. He was about to say that he felt much better able to watch over Mrs. Goddard himself than Gall the constable could possibly be; but he checked himself in time.

"Besides — what?" she asked.

"Nothing — Gall is not much of a policeman, that is all. I do not believe you would be any the safer for his protection. But you must promise me, my dear Mrs. Goddard, that if anything occurs you will let me know. I may be of some assistance."

"Thank you, so much," said she. "You are always so kind!"

"Not at all. I am very glad if you think I was right to tell you about it."

"Oh, quite right," she answered. "And now, Mr. Juxon, I am really not at all well. All this has quite unnerved me — "

"You want me to go?" said the squire smiling kindly as he rose. "Yes, I understand. Well, good-bye, my dear friend — I hope everything will clear up."

"Good-bye. Thank you again. You always do understand me," she answered giving him her small cold hand. "Don't think me ungrateful," she added, looking up into his eyes.

"No indeed — not that there is anything to be grateful for."

In a moment more he was gone, feeling that he had done his duty like a man, and that it had not been so hard after all. He was glad it was done, however, and he felt that he could face the vicar with a bold front at their next meeting. He went quickly down the path and crossed the road to his own gate with a light step. As he entered the park he was not aware of a wretched-looking tramp who slouched along the quickset hedge and watched his retreating figure far up the avenue, till he was out of sight among the leafless trees. If Stamboul had been with the squire the tramp would certainly not have

passed unnoticed; but for some days the roads had been so muddy that Stamboul had been left behind when Mr. Juxon made his visits to the cottage, lest the great hound should track the mud into the spotless precincts of the passage. The tramp stood still and looked after the squire so long as he could see him, and then slunk off across the wet meadows, where the standing water was now skimmed with ice.

Walter Goddard had spent the day in watching for the squire and he had seen him at last. He had seen him go down the road with the vicar till they were both out of sight, and he had seen him come back and enter the cottage. This proceeding, he argued, betrayed that the squire did not wish to be seen going into Mary's house by the vicar. The tortuous intelligences of bad men easily impute to others courses which they themselves would naturally pursue. Three words on the previous evening had sufficed to rouse the convict's jealousy. What he saw to-day confirmed his suspicions. The gentleman in knickerbockers could be no other than the squire himself, of course. He was evidently in the habit of visiting Mary Goddard and he did not wish his visits to be observed by the clergyman, who was of course the vicar or rector of the parish. That proved conclusively in the fugitive's mind that there was something wrong. He ground his teeth together and said to himself that it would be worth while to run some risk in order to stop that little game, as he expressed it. He had, as he himself had confessed to his wife, murdered one man in escaping; a man, he reflected, could only hang once, and if he had not been taken in the streets of London he was not likely to be caught in the high street of Billingsfield, Essex. It

would be a great satisfaction to knock the squire on the head before he went any farther. Moreover he had found a wonderfully safe retreat in the disused vault at the back of the church. He discovered loose stones inside the place which he could pile up against the low hole which served for an entrance. Probably no one knew that there was any entrance at all — the very existence of the vault was most likely forgotten. It was not a cheerful place, but Goddard's nerves were excited to a pitch far beyond the reach of supernatural fears. Whatever he might be condemned to feel in the future, his conscience troubled him very little in the present. The vault was comparatively dry and was in every way preferable, as a resting-place for one night, to the interior of a mouldy haystack in the open fields. He did not dare show himself again at the "Feathers" inn, lest he should be held to do the day's work he had promised in payment for his night in the barn. All that morning and afternoon he had lain hidden in the quickset hedge near the park gate, within sight of the cottage, and he had been rewarded. The food he had taken with him the night before had sufficed him and he had quenched his thirst with rain-water from the ditch. Having seen that the squire went back towards the Hall, Goddard slunk away to his hiding-place to wait for the night. He lay down as best he might, and listened for the hours and half-hours as the church clock tolled them out from the lofty tower above.

Mary Goddard had told him to come later than before, and it was after half-past ten when he tapped upon the shutter of the little drawing-room. All was dark within, and he held his breath as he stood

among the wet creepers, listening intently for the sound of his wife's coming. Presently the glass window inside was opened.

"Is that you?" asked Mary's voice in a tremulous whisper.

"Yes," he answered. "Let me in." Then the shutter was cautiously unfastened and opened a little and in the dim starlight Goddard recognised his wife's pale face. Her hand went out to him, with something in it.

"There is the money," she whispered. "Go as quickly as you can. They are looking for you — there are orders out to arrest you."

Goddard seized her fingers and took the money. She would have withdrawn her hand but he held it firmly.

"Who told you that they were after me?" he asked in a fierce whisper.

"Mr. Juxon — let me go."

"Mr. Juxon!" The convict uttered a rough oath. "Your friend Mr. Juxon, eh? He is after me, is he? Tell him — "

"Hush, hush!" she whispered. "He has no idea you are here — "

"I should think not," muttered Walter. "He would not be sneaking in here on the sly to see you if he knew I were about!"

"What do you mean?" asked Mary. "Oh, Walter, let me go — you hurt me so!" He held her fingers as in a vice.

"Hurt you! I wish I could strangle you and him too! Ha, you thought I was not looking this afternoon when he came! He went to the corner of the road with the parson, and when the parson was out of sight he came back! I saw you!"

"You saw nothing!" answered his wife desperately. "How can you say so! If you knew how kind he has been, what a loyal gentleman he is, you would not dare to say such things."

"You used to say I was a loyal gentleman, Mary," retorted the convict. "I daresay he is of the same stamp as I. Look here, Mary, if I catch this loyal gentleman coming here any more I will cut his throat — so look out!"

"You do not mean to say you are going to remain here any longer, in danger of your life?" said Mary in great alarm.

"Well — a man can only hang once. Give me some more of that bread and cheese, Mary. It was exceedingly good."

"Then let me go," said his wife, trembling with horror at the threat she had just heard.

"Oh yes. I will let you go. But I will just hold the window open in case you don't come back soon enough. Look sharp!"

There was no need to hurry the unfortunate woman. In less than three minutes she returned, bringing a "quartern" loaf and a large piece of cheese. She thrust them out upon the window-sill and withdrew her hand before he could catch it. But he held the window open.

"Now go!" she said. "I cannot do more for you — for God's sake go!"

"You seem very anxious to see the last of me," he whispered. "I daresay if I am hanged you will get a ticket to see me turned off. Yes — we mention those things rather freely up in town. Don't be alarmed. I will come back to-morrow night — you had better listen. If you had shown a little more

heart, I would have been satisfied, but you are so stony that I think I would like another fifty pounds to-morrow night. Those notes are so deliciously crisp —"

"Listen, Walter!" said Mary. "Unless you promise to go I will raise an alarm at once. I can face shame again well enough. I will have you — hush! For God's sake — hush! There is somebody coming!"

The convict's quick ear had caught the sound. Instantly he knelt and then lay down at full length upon the ground below the window. It was a fine night and the conscientious Mr. Gall was walking his beat. The steady tramp of his heavy shoes had something ominous in it which struck terror into the heart of the wretched fugitive. With measured tread he came from the direction of the village. Reaching the cottage he paused and dimly in the starlight Mrs. Goddard could distinguish his glazed hat — the provincial constabulary still wore hats in those days. Mr. Gall stood not fifteen yards from the cottage, failed to observe that a window was open on the lower floor, nodded to himself as though satisfied with his inspection and walked on. Little by little the sound of his steps grew fainter in the distance. Walter slowly raised himself again from the ground, and put his head in at the window.

"You see it would not be hard to have you caught," whispered his wife, still breathless with the passing excitement. "That was the policeman. If I had called him, it would have been all over with you. I tell you if you try to come again I will give you up."

"Oh, that's the way you treat me, is it?" said the

convict with another oath. "Then you had better look out for your dear Mr. Juxon, that's all."

Without another word, Goddard glided away from the window, let himself out by the wicket gate and disappeared across the road.

Mary Goddard was in that moment less horrified by her husband's threat than by his base ingratitude to herself and by the accusation he seemed to make against her. Worn out with the emotions of fear and anxiety, she had barely the strength to close and fasten the window. Then she sank into the first chair she could find in the dark and stared into the blackness around her. It seemed indeed more than she could bear. She was placed in the terrible position of being obliged to betray her fugitive husband, or of living in constant fear lest he should murder the best friend she had in the world.

CHAPTER XVI.

On the morning after the events last described Mr. Ambrose sat at breakfast opposite his wife. The early post had just arrived, bringing the usual newspaper and two letters.

"Any news, my dear?" inquired Mrs. Ambrose with great suavity, as she rinsed her teacup in the bowl preparatory to repeating the dose. "Is not it time that we should hear from John?"

"There is a letter from him, strange to say. Wait a minute — my dear, the Tripos is over and he wants to know if he may stop here — "

"The Tripos over already! How has he done? Do tell me, Augustin!"

"He does not know," returned the vicar, quickly looking over the contents of the letter. "The lists are not out — he thinks he has done very well — he has had a hint that he is high up — wants to know whether he may stop on his way to London — he is going to see his father — "

"Of course he shall come," said Mrs. Ambrose with enthusiasm. "He must stop here till the lists are published and then we shall know — anything else?"

"The other is a note from a tutor of his side — my old friend Brown — he is very enthusiastic; says it is an open secret that John will be at the head of

the list — begins to congratulate. Well, my dear, this is very satisfactory, very flattering."

"One might say very delightful, Augustin."

"Delightful, yes quite delightful," replied the vicar, burying his long nose in his teacup.

"I only hope it may be true. I was afraid that perhaps John had done himself harm by coming here at Christmas. Young men are so very light-headed, are they not, Augustin?" added Mrs. Ambrose with a prim smile. On rare occasions she had alluded to John's unfortunate passion for Mrs. Goddard, and when she spoke of the subject she had a tendency to assume something of the stiffness she affected towards strangers. As has been seen she had ceased to blame Mrs. Goddard. Generally speaking the absent are in the wrong in such matters; she could not refer to John's conduct without a touch of severity. But the Reverend Augustin bent his shaggy brows; John was now successful, probably senior classic — it was evidently no time to censure his behaviour.

"You must be charitable, my dear," he said, looking sharply at his wife. "We have all been young once you know."

"Augustin, I am surprised at you!" said Mrs. Ambrose sternly.

"For saying that I once was young?" inquired her husband. "Strange and paradoxical as such a statement must appear, I was once a baby."

"I think your merriment very unseemly," objected Mrs. Ambrose in a tone of censure. "Because you were once a baby it does not follow that you ever acted in such a very foolish way about a —"

"My dear," interrupted the vicar, handing his cup across the table, "I wish you would leave John alone,

and give me another cup of tea. John will be here to-morrow. Let us receive him as we should. He has done us credit."

"He will never be received otherwise in this house, Augustin," replied Mrs. Ambrose, "whether you allow me to speak my mind or not. I am aware that Short has done us credit, as you express it. I only hope he always may do us credit in the future. I am sure, I was like a mother to him. He ought never to forget it. Why, my dear, cannot you remember how I always had his buttons looked to and gave him globules when he wanted them? I think he might show some gratitude."

"I do not think he has failed to show it," retorted the vicar.

"Oh, well, Augustin, if you are going to talk like that it is not possible to argue with you; but he shall be welcome, if he comes. I hope, however, that he will not go to the cottage —"

"My dear, I have a funeral this morning. I wish you would not disturb my mind with these trifles."

"Trifles! Who is dead? You did not tell me."

"Poor Judd's baby, of course. We have spoken of it often enough, I am sure."

"Oh yes, of course. Poor Tom Judd!" exclaimed Mrs. Ambrose with genuine sympathy. "It seems to me you are always burying his babies, Augustin! It is very sad."

"Not always, my dear. Frequently," said the vicar correcting her. "It is very sad, as you say. Very sad. You took so much trouble to help them this time, too."

"Trouble!" Mrs. Ambrose cast up her eyes. "You don't know how much trouble. But I am quite

sure it was the fault of that brazen-faced doctor. I cannot bear the sight of him! That comes of answering advertisements in the newspapers."

The present doctor had bought the practice abandoned by Mrs. Ambrose's son-in-law. He had paid well for it, but his religious principles had not formed a part of the bargain.

"It is of no use to cry over spilt milk, my dear."

"I do not mean to. No, I never do. But it is very unpleasant to have such people about. I really hope Tom Judd will not lose his next baby. When is John coming?"

"To-morrow. My dear, if I forget it this morning, will you remember to speak to Reynolds about the calf?"

"Certainly, Augustin," said his wife. Therewith the good vicar left her and went to bury Tom Judd's baby, divided in his mind between rejoicing over his favourite pupil's success and lamenting, as he sincerely did, the misfortunes which befell his parishioners. When he left the churchyard an hour later he was met by Martha, who came from the cottage with a message begging that the vicar would come to Mrs. Goddard as soon as possible. Martha believed her mistress was ill, she wanted to see Mr. Ambrose at once. Without returning to the vicarage he turned to the left towards the cottage.

Mrs. Goddard had slept that night, being exhausted and almost broken down with fatigue. But she woke only to a sense of the utmost pain and distress, realising that to-day's anxiety was harder to bear than yesterday's, and that to-morrow might bring forth even worse disasters than those which had gone before. Her position was one of extreme doubt and peril. To

tell any one that her husband was in the neighbourhood seemed to be equivalent to rooting out the very last remnant of consideration for him which remained in her heart, the very last trace of what had once been the chief joy and delight of her life. She hesitated long. There is perhaps nothing in human nature more enduring than the love of man and wife; or perhaps one should rather say than the love of a woman for her husband. There appear to be some men capable of being so completely estranged from their wives that there positively does not remain in them even the faintest recollection of what they have once felt, nor the possibility of feeling the least pity for what the women they once loved so well may suffer. There is no woman, I believe, who having once loved her husband truly, could see him in pain or distress, or in danger of his life, without earnestly endeavouring to help him. A woman may cease to love her husband; in some cases she is right in forgetting her love, but it would be hard to find a case where, were he the worst criminal alive, had he deceived her a thousand times, she would not at least help him to escape from his pursuers or give him a crust to save him from starvation.

Mary Goddard had done her best for the wretch who had claimed her assistance. She had fed him, provided him with money, refused to betray him. But if it were to be a question of giving him up to the law, or of allowing her best friend to be murdered by him, or even seriously injured, she felt that pity must be at an end. It would be doubtless a very horrible thing to give him up, and she had gathered from what he had said that if he were taken he would pay the last penalty of the law. It was so awful a

thing that she groaned when she thought of it. But she remembered his ghastly face in the starlight and the threat he had hissed out against the squire; he was a desperate man, with blood already on his hands. It was more than likely that he would do the deed he had threatened to do. What could be easier than to watch the squire on one of those evenings when he went up the park alone, to fall upon him and take his life? Of late Mr. Juxon did not even take his dog with him. The savage bloodhound would be a good protector; but even when he took Stamboul with him by day, he never brought him at night. It was too long for the beast to wait, he used to say, from six to nine or half past; he was so savage that he did not care to leave him out of his sight; he brought mud into the cottage, or into the vicarage as the case might be — if Stamboul had been an ordinary dog it would have been different. Those Russian bloodhounds were not to be trifled with. But the squire must be warned of his danger before another night came on.

It was a difficult question. Mrs. Goddard at first thought of telling him herself; but she shrank from the thought, for she was exhausted and overwrought. A few days ago she would have been brave enough to say anything if necessary, but now she had no longer the courage nor the strength. It seemed so hard to face the squire with such a warning; it seemed as though she were doing something which would make her seem ungrateful in his eyes, though she hardly knew why it seemed so. She turned more naturally to the vicar, to whom she had originally come in her first great distress; she had only once consulted him, but that one occasion seemed to establish a prece-

dent in her mind, the precedent of a thing familiar. It would certainly be easier. After much thought and inward debate, she determined to send for Mr. Ambrose.

The fatigue and anxiety she had undergone during the last two days had wrought great changes in her face. A girl of eighteen or twenty years may gain delicacy and even beauty from the physical effects of grief, but a woman over thirty years old gains neither. Mrs. Goddard's complexion, naturally pale, had taken a livid hue; her lips, which were never very red, were almost white; heavy purple shadows darkened her eyes; the two or three lines that were hardly noticeable, but which were the natural result of a sad expression in her face, had in two days become distinctly visible and had almost assumed the proportions of veritable wrinkles. Her features were drawn and pinched — she looked ten years older than she was. Nothing remained of her beauty but her soft waving brown hair and her deep, pathetic, violet eyes. Even her small hands seemed to have grown thin and looked unnaturally white and transparent.

She was sitting in her favourite chair by the fire, when the vicar arrived. She had not been willing to seem ill, in spite of what Martha had said, and she had refused to put cushions in the chair. She was making an effort, and even a little sense of physical discomfort helped to make the effort seem easier. She was so much exhausted that she felt she must not for one moment relax the tension she imposed upon herself lest her whole remaining strength should suddenly collapse and leave her at the mercy of events. But Mr. Ambrose was startled when he saw her and feared that she was very ill.

"My dear Mrs. Goddard," he said, "what is the matter? Are you ill? Has anything happened?"

As he spoke he changed the form of his question, suddenly recollecting that Mr. Juxon had probably on the previous afternoon told her of her husband's escape, as he had meant to do. This might be the cause of her indisposition.

"Yes," she said in a voice that did not sound like her own, "I have asked you to come because I am in great trouble — in desperate trouble."

"Dear me," said the vicar, "I hope not!"

"Not desperate? Perhaps not. Dear Mr. Ambrose, you have always been so kind to me — I am sure you can help me now." Her voice trembled.

"Indeed I will do my best," said the vicar who judged from so unusual an outburst that there must be really something wrong. "If you could tell me what it is — " he suggested.

"That is the hardest part of it," said the unhappy woman. She paused a moment as though to collect her strength. "You know," she began again, "that my husband has escaped?"

"A terrible business!" exclaimed the good man, nodding, however, in affirmation to the question she asked.

"I have seen him," said Mary Goddard very faintly, looking down at her thin hands. The vicar started in astonishment.

"My dear friend — dear me! Dear, dear, how very painful!"

"Indeed, you do not know what I have suffered. It is most dreadful, Mr. Ambrose. You cannot imagine what a struggle it was. I am quite worn out."

She spoke with such evident pain that the vicar was

moved. He felt that she had more to tell, but he had hardly recovered from his surprise.

"But, you know," he said, "that was the whole object of warning you. We did not really believe that he would come here. We were so much afraid that he would startle you. Of course Mr. Juxon told you he consulted me — "

"Of course," answered Mrs. Goddard. "It was too late. I had seen him the night before."

"Why, that was the very night we were here!" exclaimed Mr. Ambrose, more and more amazed. Mrs. Goddard nodded. She seemed hardly able to speak.

"He came and knocked at that window," she said, very faintly. "He came again last night."

"Dear me — I will send for Gall at once; he will have no difficulty in arresting him — "

"Oh please!" interrupted Mrs. Goddard in hysterical tones. "Please, please, dear Mr. Ambrose, don't!"

The vicar was silent. He rose unceremoniously from his chair and walked to the window, as he generally did when in any great doubt. He realised at once and very vividly the awful position in which the poor lady was placed.

"Pray do not think I am very bad," said she, almost sobbing with fear and emotion. "Of course it must seem dreadful to you that I should wish him to escape!"

The vicar came slowly back and stood beside her leaning against the chimney-piece. It did not take him long to make up his mind. Kind-hearted people are generally impulsive.

"I do not, my dear lady. I assure you I fully

understand your position. The fact is, I was too much surprised and I am too anxious for your safety not to think immediately of securing that — ahem — that unfortunate man."

"Oh, it is not my safety! It is not only my safety — "

"I understand — yes — of course you are anxious about him. But it is doubtless not our business to aid the law in its course, provided we do not oppose it."

"It is something else," murmured Mrs. Goddard. "Oh! how shall I tell you," she moaned turning her pale cheek to the back of the chair.

The vicar looked at her and began to think it was perhaps some strange case of conscience with which he had to deal. He had very little experience of such things save in the rude form they take among the labouring classes. But he reflected that it was likely to be something of the kind; in such a case Mrs. Goddard would naturally enough have sent for him, more as her clergyman than as her friend. She looked like a person suffering from some great mental strain. He sat down beside her and took her passive hand. He was moved, and felt as though he might have been her father.

"My dear," he said kindly, almost as though he were speaking to a child, "have you anything upon your mind, anything which distresses you? Do you wish to tell me? If so I will do my very best to help you."

Mrs. Goddard's fingers pressed his hand a little, but her face was still turned away.

"It is Mr. Juxon," she almost whispered. If she had been watching the vicar she would have noticed

the strange air of perplexity which came over his face when he heard the squire's name.

"Yes — Mr. Juxon," she moaned. Then the choked-down horror rose in her throat. "Walter means to murder him!" she almost screamed. "Oh, my God, my God, what shall I do!" she cried aloud clasping her hands suddenly over her face and rocking herself to and fro.

The vicar was horror-struck; he could hardly believe his ears, and believing them his senses swam. In his wildest dreams — and the good man's dreams were rarely wild — he had never thought that such things could come near him. Being a very good man and, moreover, a wise man when he had plenty of time for reflection, he folded his hands quietly and bent his head, praying fervently for the poor tortured woman who moaned and tossed herself beside him. It was a terrible moment. Suddenly she controlled herself and grasping one of the arms of the chair looked round at her silent companion.

"You must save him," she said in agonised tones, "you must save them both! Do not tell me you cannot — oh, do not tell me that!"

It was a passionate and heart-broken appeal, such a one as few men would or could resist, coming as it did from a helpless and miserably unhappy woman. Whether the vicar was wise in giving the answer he did, it would be hard to say: but he was a man who honestly tried to do his best.

"I will try, my dear lady," he said, making a great resolution. Mrs. Goddard took his hand and pressed it in both of hers, and the long restrained tears flowed fast and softly over her worn cheeks. For some moments neither spoke.

"If you cannot save both — you must save — Mr. Juxon," she said at last, breathing the words rather than speaking them.

The vicar knew or guessed what it must cost her to hint that her husband might be captured. He recognised that the only way in which he could contribute towards the escape of the convict was by not revealing his hiding-place, and he accordingly refrained from asking where he was concealed. He shuddered as he thought that Goddard might be lying hidden in the cottage itself, for all he could tell, but he was quite sure that he ought not to know it So long as he did not know where the forger was, it was easy to hold his peace; but if once he knew, the vicar was not capable of denying the knowledge. He had never told a lie in his life.

"I will try," he repeated; and growing calmer, he added, "You are quite sure this was not an empty threat, my dear friend? Was there any reason — a — I mean to say, had this unfortunate man ever known Mr. Juxon?"

"Oh no!" answered Mrs. Goddard, sinking back into her chair. "He never knew him." Her tears were still flowing but she no longer sobbed aloud; it had been a relief to her overwrought and sensitive temperament to give way to the fit of weeping. She actually felt better, though ten minutes earlier she would not have believed it possible.

"Then — why?" asked Mr. Ambrose, hesitating.

"My poor husband was a very jealous man," she answered. "I accidentally told him that the cottage belonged to Mr. Juxon and yesterday — do you remember? You walked on with Mr. Juxon beyond the turning, and then he came back to see me — to

tell me of my husband's escape. Walter saw that and — and he thought, I suppose — that Mr. Juxon did not want you to see him coming here."

"But Mr. Juxon had just promised me to go and see you," said the honest vicar.

"Yes," said poor Mrs. Goddard, beginning to sob again, "but Walter — my husband — thinks that I — I care for Mr. Juxon - -he is so jealous," cried she, again covering her face with her hands. The starting tears trickled through her fingers and fell upon her black dress. She was ashamed, this time, for she hated even to speak of such a possibility.

"I understand," answered Mr. Ambrose gravely. It certainly did not strike him that it might be true, and his knowledge of such characters as Walter Goddard was got chiefly from the newspapers. He had often noticed in reports of trials and detailed descriptions of crimes that criminals seem to become entirely irrational after a certain length of time, and it was one of the arguments he best understood for demonstrating that bad men either are originally, or ultimately become mad. To men like the vicar, almost the only possible theory of crime is the theory of insanity. It is positively impossible for a man who has passed thirty or forty years in a quiet country parish to comprehend the motives or the actions of great criminals. He naturally says they must be crazy or they would not do such things. If Goddard were crazy enough to commit a forgery, he was crazy enough for anything, even to the extent of suspecting that his wife loved the squire.

"I think," said Mr. Ambrose, "that if you agree with me it will be best to warn Mr. Juxon of his danger."

"Of course," murmured Mrs. Goddard. "You must warn him at once!"

"I will go to the Hall now," said the vicar bravely. "But — I am very sorry to have to dwell on the subject, my dear lady, but, without wishing in the least to know where the — your husband is, could you tell me anything about his appearance? For instance, if you understand what I mean, supposing that Mr. Juxon knew how he looked and should happen to meet him, knowing that he wished to kill him — he might perhaps avoid him, if you understand me?"

The vicar's English was a little disturbed by his extreme desire not to hurt Mrs. Goddard's feelings. If the squire and his dog chanced to meet Walter Goddard they would probably not avoid him as the vicar expressed it; that was a point Mr. Ambrose was willing to leave to Mrs. Goddard's imagination.

"Yes — must you know?" she asked anxiously.

"We must know that," returned the vicar.

"He is disguised as a poor tramp," she said sorrowfully. "He wears a smock-frock and an old hat I think. He is pale — oh, poor, poor Walter!" she cried again bursting into tears.

Mr. Ambrose could say nothing. There was nothing to be said. He rose and took his hat — the old tall hat he wore to his parishioners' funerals. They were very primitive people in Billingsfield.

"I will go at once," he said. "Believe me, you have all my sympathy — I will do all I can."

Mary Goddard thanked him more by her looks than with any words she was able to speak. But she was none the less truly grateful for his sympathy and aid. She had a kind of blind reliance on him which made her feel that since she had once confided her

trouble and danger nothing more could possibly be done. When he was gone, she sobbed with relief, as before she had wept for fear; she was hysterical, unstrung, utterly unlike herself.

But as the vicar went up towards the Hall he felt that he had his hands full, and he felt moreover an uneasy sensation which he could not have explained. He was certainly no coward, but he had never been in such a position before and he did not like it; there was an air of danger about, an atmosphere which gave him a peculiarly unpleasant thrill from time to time. He was not engaged upon an agreeable errand, and he had a vague feeling, due, the scientists would have told him, to unconscious ratiocination, which seemed to tell him that something was going to happen. People who are very often in danger know that singular uneasiness which warns them that all is not well; it is not like anything else that can be felt. No one really knows its cause, unless it be true that the mind sometimes reasons for itself without the consciousness of the body, and communicates to the latter a spasmodic warning, the result of its cogitations.

To say to the sturdy squire, "Beware of a man in a smock-frock, one Goddard the forger, who means to murder you," seemed of itself simple enough. But for the squire to distinguish this same Goddard from all other men in smock-frocks was a less easy matter. The vicar, indeed, could tell a strange face at a hundred yards, for he knew every man, woman and child in his parish; but the squire's acquaintance was more limited. Obviously, said Mr. Ambrose to himself, the squire's best course would be to stay quietly at home until the danger was passed, and to pass word to Policeman Gall to lay hands on any particularly

seedy-looking tramps he happened to see in the village. It was Gall's duty to do so in any case, as he had been warned to be on the look-out. Mr. Ambrose inwardly wondered where the man could be hiding. Billingsfield was not, he believed, an easy place to hide in, for every ploughman knew his fellow, and a new face was always an object of suspicion. Not a gipsy tinker entered the village but what every one heard of it, and though tramps came through from time to time, it would be a difficult matter for one of them to remain two days in the place without attracting a great deal of attention. It was possible that Walter Goddard might have been concealed for one night in his wife's house, but even there he could not have remained hidden for two days without being seen by Mrs. Goddard's two women servants. The vicar walked rapidly through the park, looking about him suspiciously as he went. Goddard might at that very moment be lurking behind any one of those oaks; it would be most unpleasant if he mistook the vicar for the squire. But that, the vicar reflected, was impossible on account of his clerical dress. He reached the Hall in safety and stood looking down among the leafless trees, waiting for the door to be opened.

CHAPTER XVII.

Mr. Juxon received the vicar in the library as he had received him on the previous day; but on the present occasion Mr. Ambrose had not been sent for and the squire's face wore an expression of inquiry. He supposed his friend had come to ask him the result of the interview with Mrs. Goddard, and as he himself was on the point of going towards the cottage he wished the vicar had come at a later or an earlier hour.

"I have a message to give you," said Mr. Ambrose, "a very important message."

"Indeed?" answered the squire, observing his serious face.

"Yes. I had better tell you at once. Mrs. Goddard sent for me this morning. She has actually seen her husband, who must be hiding in the neighbourhood. He came to her drawing-room window last night and the night before."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Juxon. "You don't tell me so!"

"That is not the worst of the matter," continued the vicar, looking very grave and fixing his eyes on the squire's face. "This villainous fellow has been threatening to take your life, Mr. Juxon."

Mr. Juxon stared at the vicar for a moment in surprise, and then broke into a hearty laugh.

"My life!" he cried. "Upon my word, the fellow

does not know what he is talking about! Do you mean to say that this escaped convict, who can be arrested at sight wherever he is found, imagines that he could attack me in broad daylight without being caught?"

"Well, no, I suppose not — but you often walk home at night, Mr. Juxon — alone through the park."

"I think that dog of mine could manage Mr. Goddard," remarked the squire calmly. "And pray, Mr. Ambrose, now that we know that the man is in the neighbourhood, what is to prevent us from finding him?"

"We do not know where he is," replied the vicar, thanking the inspiration which had prevented him from asking Mrs. Goddard more questions. He had promised to save Goddard, too, or at least not to facilitate his capture. But though he was glad to be able to say honestly that he did not know where he was, he began to doubt whether in the eyes of the law he was acting rightly.

"You do not know?" asked the squire.

"No; and besides I think — perhaps — we ought to consider poor Mrs. Goddard's position."

"Mrs. Goddard's position!" exclaimed Mr. Juxon almost angrily. "And who should consider her position more than I, Mr. Ambrose? My dear sir, I consider her position before all things — of course I do. But nothing could be of greater advantage to her position than the certainty that her husband is safely lodged in prison. I cannot imagine how he contrived to escape — can you?"

"No, I cannot," answered Mr. Ambrose, thrusting his hands into his pockets and biting his long upper lip.

"By the bye, did the fellow happen to say why he meant to lay violent hands on me?" inquired Mr. Juxon.

"Since you ask — he did. It appears that he saw you going into the cottage, and immediately became jealous — "

"Of me?" Mr. Juxon coloured a little beneath his bronzed complexion, and grew more angry. "Well, upon my word! But if that is true I am much obliged for your warning. Fellows of that sort never reason — he will very likely attack me as you say. It will be quite the last time he attacks anybody — the devil shall have his own, Mr. Ambrose, if I can help him to it — "

"Dear me! Mr. Juxon — you surprise me," said the vicar, who had never heard his friend use such strong language before.

"It is enough to surprise anybody," remarked the squire. "I trust we shall surprise Mr. Goddard before night. Excuse me, but when did he express his amiable intentions towards me?"

"Last night, I believe," replied Mr. Ambrose, reluctantly.

"And when did he see me going into the cottage?"

"Yesterday afternoon, I believe." The vicar felt as though he were beginning to break his promise of shielding the fugitive, but he could not refuse to answer a direct question.

"Then, when he saw me, he was either in the cottage or in the park. There was no one in the road, I am quite sure."

"I do not know," said the vicar, delighted at being able to say so. He was such a simple man that Mr.

Juxon noticed the tone of relief in which he denied any knowledge of Goddard's whereabouts on the previous day as compared with his reluctance to answer upon those points of which he was certain.

"You are not anxious that Goddard should be caught," said the squire rather sharply.

"Frankly," returned the vicar, "I do not wish to be instrumental in his capture — not that I am likely to be."

"That is none of my business, Mr. Ambrose. I will try and catch him alone. But it would be better that he should be taken alive and quietly — "

"Surely," cried the vicar in great alarm, "you would not kill him?"

"Oh no, certainly not. But my dog might, Mr. Ambrose. They are ugly dogs when they are angry, and they have a remarkable faculty for finding people who are lost. They used to use them in Russia for tracking fugitive serfs and convicts who escaped from Siberia."

Mr. Ambrose shuddered. The honest squire seemed almost as bloodthirsty in his eyes as the convict Goddard. He felt that he did not understand Mr. Juxon. The idea of hunting people with blood-hounds seemed utterly foreign to his English nature, and he could not understand how his English friend could entertain such a thought; he probably forgot that a few generations earlier the hunting of all kinds of men, papists, dissenters, covenanters and rebels, with dogs, had been a favourite English sport.

"Really, Mr. Juxon," he said in an agitated tone, "I think you would do much better to protect yourself with the means provided by the law. Considerations of humanity — "

"Considerations of humanity, sir, are at an end when one man threatens the life of another. You admit yourself that I am not safe unless Goddard is caught, and yet you object to my method of catching him. That is illogical."

The vicar felt that this was to some extent true; but he was not willing to admit it. He knew also that if he could dissuade the squire from his barbarous scheme, Goddard would have a far better chance of escape.

"I think that with the assistance of Gall and a London detective —" he began.

"Gall is an old woman, Mr. Ambrose, and it will take twenty-four hours to get a detective from town. In twenty-four hours this man may have attacked me."

"He will hardly attempt to force his way into your house, Mr. Juxon."

"So then, I am to stay at home to suit his convenience? I will not do any such thing. Besides, in twenty-four hours Goddard may have changed his mind and may have taken himself off. For the rest of her life Mrs. Goddard will then be exposed to the possibility of every kind of annoyance."

"He would never come back, I am sure," objected the vicar.

"Why not? Every time he comes she will give him money. The more money she gives him the more often he will come, unless we put an end to his coming altogether."

"You seem to forget," urged Mr. Ambrose, "that there will be a vigorous search made for him. Why not telegraph to the governor of Portland?"

"I thought you wanted to save Mrs. Goddard from

needless scandal; did you not?" returned the squire. "The governor of Portland would send down a squad of police who would publish the whole affair. He would have done so as soon as the man escaped had he known that Mrs. Goddard lived here."

"I wonder how Goddard himself knew it," remarked Mr. Ambrose.

"I don't know. Perhaps she told him she was coming here, at their last interview. Or perhaps she wrote to him in prison and the governor overlooked the letter. Anything like that would account for it."

"But if you catch him — alive," hesitated the vicar, "it will all be known at once. I do not see how you can prevent that."

"If I catch him alive, I will take him out of Billingsfield without any one's knowledge. I do not mean to hurt him. I only want to get him back to prison. Believe me, I am much more anxious than you can possibly be to save Mrs. Goddard from harm."

"Very well. I have done my errand," said Mr. Ambrose, with a sort of sigh of relief. "I confess, I am in great anxiety of mind, both on your account and on hers. I never dreamed that such things could happen in Billingsfield."

"You are certainly not responsible for them," answered Mr. Juxon. "It is not your fault — "

"Not altogether, perhaps. But I was perhaps wrong in letting her come here — no, I am sure I was not," he added impulsively, as though ashamed of having said anything so unkind.

"Certainly not. You were quite right, Mr. Ambrose, quite right, I assure you."

"Well, I hope all may yet be for the best," said the vicar.

"Let us hope so," replied Mr. Juxon gravely. "By all means, let us hope that all may be for the best."

Whether the squire doubted the possibility of so happy an issue to events or not, is uncertain. He felt almost more sorry for the vicar than for himself; the vicar was such a good man, so unused to the violent deeds of violent people, of which the squire in his wanderings had seen more than was necessary to convince him that all was not always for the best in this best of all possible worlds.

Mr. Ambrose left his friend and as he retraced his steps through the park was more disturbed than ever. That Goddard should contemplate killing the squire was bad enough, in all conscience, but that the squire should deliberately purpose to hunt down Goddard with his bloodhound seemed somehow even worse. The vicar had indeed promised Mrs. Goddard that he would not help to capture her husband, but he would have been as glad as any one to hear that the convict was once more lodged in his prison. There lurked in his mind, nevertheless, an impression that even a convict should have a fair chance. The idea was not expressed, but existed in him. Everybody, he would have said, ought to have a fair chance, and as the law of nations forbids the use of explosive bullets in warfare, the laws of humanity seemed to forbid the use of bloodhounds in the pursuit of criminals. He had a very great respect for the squire's character and principles, but the cold-blooded way in which Mr. Juxon had spoken of catching and probably killing Walter Goddard, had shaken the good vicar's belief in his friend. He doubted whether he were not now bound to return to Mrs. Goddard and to warn her in

his turn of her husband's danger, whether he ought not to do something to save the wretched convict from his fate. It seemed hideous to think that in peaceful Billingsfield, in his own lonely parish, a human being should be exposed to such peril. But at this point the vicar's continuity forsook him. He had not the heart to tell the tale of his interview with Mr. Juxon to the unhappy lady he had left that morning. It was extremely improbable, he thought, that she should be able to communicate with her husband during the day, and the squire's language led him to think that the day would not pass without some attempt to discover Walter Goddard's hiding-place. Besides, the vicar's mind was altogether more disturbed than it had been in thirty years, and he was no longer able to account to himself with absolute accuracy for what he did. At all events, he felt that it was better not to tell Mrs. Goddard what the squire had said.

When he was gone, Mr. Juxon paced his library alone in the greatest uncertainty. He had told the vicar in his anger that he would find Goddard with the help of Stamboul. That the hound was able to accomplish the feat in the present weather, and if Goddard had actually stood some time at the cottage window on the previous night, he did not doubt for a moment. The vicar had mentioned the window to him when he told him that Mrs. Goddard had seen her husband. He had probably been at the window as late as midnight, and the scent, renewed by his visit, would not be twelve hours old. Stamboul could find the man, unless he had got into a cart, which was improbable. But a new and startling consideration presented itself to the squire's mind when

the vicar was gone and his anger had subsided; a consideration which made him hesitate what course to pursue.

That he would be justified in using any means in his power to catch the criminal seemed certain. It would be for the public good that he should be delivered up to justice as soon as possible. So long as Goddard was at large the squire's own life was not safe, and Mrs. Goddard was liable to all kinds of annoyances at any moment. There was every reason why the fellow should be captured. But to capture him, safe and sound, was one thing; to expose him to the jaws of Stamboul was quite another. Mr. Juxon had a lively recollection of the day in the Belgrade forest when the great hound had pulled down one of his assailants, making his fangs meet through flesh and bone. If Stamboul were set upon Goddard's track, the convict could hardly escape with his life. In the first flush of the squire's anger this seemed of little importance. But on mature reflection the thing appeared in a different light.

He loved Mrs. Goddard in his own way, which was a very honourable way, if not very passionate. He had asked her to marry him. She had expressed a wish that she were a widow, implying perhaps that if she had been free she would have accepted him. If the obstacle of her living husband were removed, it was not improbable that she would look favourably upon the squire's suit; to bring Goddard to an untimely end would undoubtedly be to clear the way for the squire. It was not then, a legitimate desire for justice which made him wish to catch the convict and almost to wish that Stamboul might worry him to death; it was the secret hope that Goddard might be

killed and that he, Charles James Juxon, might have the chance to marry his widow. "In other words," he said to himself, "I really want to murder Goddard and take his wife."

It was not easy to see where legitimate severity ended and unlawful and murderous selfishness began. The temptation was a terrible one. The very uncertainty which there was, tempted the squire to disregard the possibility of Goddard's death as compared with the importance of his capture. It was quite likely, he unconsciously argued, that the bloodhound would not kill him after all; it was even possible that he might not find him; but it would be worth while to make the attempt, for the results to be obtained by catching the fugitive were very great—Mrs. Goddard's peace was to be considered before all things. But still before the squire's eyes arose the picture of Stamboul tearing the throat of the man he had killed in the Belgrade forest. If he killed the felon, Juxon would know that to all intents and purposes he had himself done the deed in order to marry Mrs. Goddard. But still the thought remained with him and would not leave him.

The fellow had threatened his own life. It was then a fair fight, for a man cannot be blamed if he tries to get the better of one who is going about to kill him. On one of his many voyages, he had once shot a man in order to quell a mutiny; he had not killed him it is true, but he had disabled him for the time — he had handled many a rough customer in his day. The case, he thought, was similar, for it was the case of self-defence. The law, even, would say he was justified. But to slay a man in self-defence and then to marry his widow, though justifiable in

law, is a very delicate case for the conscience; and in spite of the wandering life he had led, Mr. Juxon's conscience was sensitive. He was an honest man and a gentleman, he had tried all his life to do right as he saw it, and did not mean to turn murderer now, no matter how easy it would be for him to defend his action.

At the end of an hour he had decided that it would be murder, and no less, to let Stamboul track Goddard to his hiding-place. The hound might accompany him in his walks, and if anybody attacked him it would be so much the worse for his assailant. Murder or no murder, he was entitled to take any precautions he pleased against an assault. But he would not willingly put the bloodhound on the scent, and he knew well enough that the dog would not run upon a strange trail unless he were put to it. The squire went to his lunch, feeling that he had made a good resolution; but he ate little and soon afterwards began to feel the need of going down to see Mrs. Goddard. No day was complete without seeing her, and considering the circumstances which had occurred on the previous afternoon, it was natural that he should call to inquire after her state. In the hall, the gigantic beast which had played such an important part in his thoughts during the morning, came solemnly up to him, raising his great red eyes as though asking whether he were to accompany his master. The squire stood still and looked at him for a moment.

"Come along, Stamboul!" he said suddenly, as he put on his hat. The hound leaped up and laid his heavy paws on the squire's shoulders, trying to lick his face in his delight, then, almost upsetting the

sturdy man he sprang back, slipped on the polished floor, recovered himself and with an enormous stride bounded past Mr. Juxon, out into the park. But Mr. Juxon quickly called him back, and presently he was following close at heel in his own stately way, looking neither to the right nor to the left. The squire felt nervous, and the sensation was new to him. He did not believe that Goddard would really attack him at all, certainly not that he would dare to attack him in broad daylight. But the knowledge of the threat the fellow had uttered made him watchful. He glanced to the right and left as he walked and gripped his heavy blackthorn stick firmly in his hand. He wished that if the man were to appear he would come quickly — it might be hard to hold Stamboul back if he were attacked unawares.

He reached the gate, crossed the road and rang the bell of the cottage. As he stood waiting, Stamboul smelled the ground, put up his head, smelled it again and with his nose down trotted slowly to the window on the left hand of the door. He smelled the ground, the wall and presently put both his fore paws upon the outer ledge of the window. Then he dropped again, and looked at his master. Martha was a long time in coming to the door.

"After him, Stamboul!" said the squire, almost unconsciously. The dog put his nose down and began to move slowly about. At that moment the door opened.

"Oh, sir," said Martha, "it's you, sir. I was to say, if you please, that if you called, Mrs. Goddard was poorly to-day, sir."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Juxon, "I hope she is not ill. Is it anything serious, Martha?"

"Well, sir, she's been down this mornin', but her head ached terrible bad and she went back to her room — oh, sir, your dog — he's a runnin' home."

As she spoke a sound rang in the air that made Martha start back. It was a deep, resounding, bell-like note, fierce and wild, rising and falling, low but full, with a horror indescribable in its echo — the sound which no man who has heard it ever forgets — the baying of a bloodhound on the track of a man.

The squire turned deadly pale, but he shouted with all his might, as he would have shouted to a man on the topsail yard in a gale at sea.

"Stamboul! Stamboul! Stamboul!" Again and again he yelled the dog's name.

Stamboul had not gone far. The quickset hedge had baffled the scent for a moment and he was not a dozen yards beyond it in the park when his master's cry stopped him. Instantly he turned, cleared the six-foot hedge and double ditch at a bound and came leaping back across the road. The squire breathed hard, for it had been a terrible moment. If he had not succeeded in calling the beast back, it might have been all over with Walter Goddard, wherever he was hidden.

"It is only his play," said Mr. Juxon, still very white and holding Stamboul by the collar. "Please tell Mrs. Goddard, Martha, that I am very sorry indeed to hear that she is ill, and that I will inquire this evening."

"Yes, sir," said Martha, who eyed the panting beast timidly and showed an evident desire to shut the door as soon as possible.

The squire felt more nervous than ever as he walked slowly along the road in the direction of the village,

his hand still on the bloodhound's collar. He felt what a narrow escape Goddard had probably had, and the terrible sound of Stamboul's baying had brought back to him once again and very vividly the scene in the woods by the Bosphorus. He felt that for a few minutes at least he would rather not enter the park with the dog by him, and he naturally turned towards the vicarage, not with any intention of going in, but from sheer force of custom, as people under the influence of strong emotions often do things unconsciously which they are in the habit of doing. He walked slowly along, and had almost reached Mr. Ambrose's pretty old red brick house, when he found himself face to face with the vicar's wife. She presented an imposing appearance, as usual; her grey skirt, drawn up a little from the mud, revealed a bright red petticoat and those stout shoes which she regarded as so essential to health; she wore moreover a capacious sealskin jacket and a dark bonnet with certain jet flowers, which for many years had been regarded by the inhabitants of Billingsfield as the distinctive badge of a gentlewoman. Mrs. Ambrose was wont to smile and say that they were indestructible and would last as long as she did. She greeted Mr. Juxon cordially.

"How do you, Mr. Juxon — were you going to see us? I was just going for a walk — perhaps you will come with me?"

Mr. Juxon turned back and prepared to accompany her.

"Such good news this morning, from John Short," she said. "He has finished his examinations, and it seems almost certain that he will be senior classic. His tutor at Trinity has written already to congratulate my husband upon his success."

"I am sure, I am delighted, too," said the squire, who had regained his composure but kept his hold on Stamboul's collar. "He deserves all he gets, and more too," he continued. "I think he will be a remarkable man."

"I did not think you liked him so very much," said Mrs. Ambrose rather doubtfully, as she walked slowly by his side.

"Oh — I liked him very much. Indeed, I was going to ask him to stay with me for a few days at the Hall."

The inspiration was spontaneous. Mr. Juxon was in a frame of mind in which he felt that he ought to do something pleasant for somebody, to set off against the bloodthirsty designs which had passed through his mind in the morning. He knew that if he had not been over friendly to John, it had been John's own fault; but since he had found out that it was impossible to marry Mrs. Goddard, he had forgiven the young scholar his shortcomings and felt very charitably inclined towards him. It suddenly struck him that it would give John great pleasure to stop at the Hall for a few days, and that it would be no inconvenience to himself. The effect upon Mrs. Ambrose was greater even than he had expected. She was hospitable, good and kind, but she was also economical, as she had need to be. The squire was rich. If the squire would put up John during a part of his visit it would be a kindness to John himself, and an economy to the vicarage. Mr. Ambrose himself would not have gone to such a length; but then, as his wife said to herself in self-defence, Augustin did not pay the butcher's bills, and did not know how the money went. She did not say that Augustin was

precisely what is called reckless, but he of course did not understand economy as she did. How should he, poor man, with all his sermons and his funerals and other occupations to take his mind off? Mrs. Ambrose was delighted at the squire's proposal.

"Really!" she exclaimed. "That would be too good of you, Mr. Juxon. And you do not know how it would quite delight him! He loves books so much, and then you know," she added in a confidential manner, "he has never stayed in a country house in his life, I am quite sure."

"And when is he coming down?" asked Mr. Juxon. "I should be very much pleased to have him."

"To-morrow, I think," said Mrs. Ambrose.

"Well — would you ask him from me to come up and stop a week? Can you spare him, Mrs. Ambrose? I know you are very fond of him, of course, but — "

"Oh very," said she warmly. "But I think it likely he will stay some time," she added in explanation of her willingness to let him go to the Hall.

The squire felt vaguely that the presence of a guest in his house would probably be a restraint upon him, and he felt that some restraint would be agreeable to him at the present time.

"Besides," added Mrs. Ambrose, "if you would like to have him first — there is a little repair necessary in his room at the vicarage — we have put it off too long — "

"By all means," said the squire, following out his own train of thought. "Send him up to me as soon as he comes. If I can manage it I will be down here to ask him myself."

"It is so good of you," said Mrs. Ambrose.

"Not at all. Are you going to the cottage?"

"Yes — why?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Juxon. "I did not know whether you would like to walk on a little farther with me. Good-bye, then. You will tell Short as soon as he comes, will you not?"

"Certainly," replied Mrs. Ambrose, still beaming upon him. "I will not let him unpack his things at the vicarage. Good-bye — so many thanks."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Mrs. Goddard's head ached "terrible bad" according to Martha, and when the vicar left her she went and lay down upon her bed, with a sensation that if the worst were not yet over she could bear no more. But she had an elastic temperament, and the fact of having consulted Mr. Ambrose that morning had been a greater relief than she herself suspected. She felt that he could be trusted to save Mr. Juxon from harm and Walter from capture, and having once confided to him the important secret which had so heavily weighed upon her mind she felt that the burthen of her troubles was lightened. Mr. Juxon could take any measures he pleased for his own safety; he would probably choose to stay at home until the danger was past. As for her husband, Mary Goddard did not believe that he would return a third time, for she thought that she had thoroughly frightened him. It was even likely that he had only thrown out his threat for the sake of terrifying his wife, and was now far beyond the limits of the parish. So great was the relief she felt after she had talked with the vicar that she almost ceased to believe there was any danger at all; looking at it in the light of her present mood, she almost wondered why she had thought it necessary to tell Mr. Ambrose — until suddenly a vision of her friend the squire, attacked and perhaps killed, in his own park, rose to her men-

tal vision, and she remembered what agonies of fear she had felt for him until she had sent for the vicar. The latter indeed seemed to have been a sort of *deus ex machinâ* by whom she suddenly obtained peace of mind and a sense of security in the hour of her greatest distress.

All that afternoon she lay upon her bed, while Nellie sat beside her and read to her, and stroked her hands; for Nellie was in reality passionately fond of her mother and suffered almost as much at the sight of her suffering as she could have done had she been in pain herself. Both Mrs. Goddard and the child started at the sound of Stamboul's baying, which was unlike anything they had ever heard before, and Nellie ran to the window.

"It is only Mr. Juxon and Stamboul having a game," said Nellie. "What a noise he made, though! Did not he?"

Poor Nellie — had she had any idea of what the "game" was from which the squire found it so hard to make his hound desist, she must have gone almost mad with horror. For the game was her own father, poor child. But she came back and sat beside her mother utterly unconscious of what might have happened if Stamboul had once got beyond earshot, galloping along the trail towards the disused vault at the back of the church. Mrs. Goddard had started at the sounds and had put her hand to her forehead, but Nellie's explanation was enough to quiet her, and she smiled faintly and closed her eyes again. Then, half an hour later, Mrs. Ambrose came, and would not be denied. She wanted to make Mrs. Goddard comfortable, she said, when she found she was ill, and she did her best, being a kind and motherly

woman when not hardened by the presence of strangers. She told her that John was coming on the next day, speaking with vast pride of his success and omitting to look sternly at Mrs. Goddard as she had formerly been accustomed to do when she spoke of the young scholar. Then at last she went away, after exacting a promise from Mrs. Goddard to come and dine, bringing Nellie with her, on the following day, in case she should have recovered by that time from her headache.

But during all that night Mrs. Goddard lay awake, listening for the sound she so much dreaded, of a creeping footstep on the slated path outside and for the tapping at the window. Nothing came, however, and as the grey dawn began to creep in through the white curtains, she fell peacefully asleep. Nellie would not let her be waked, and breakfasted without her, enjoying with childish delight the state of being waited on by Martha alone.

Meanwhile, at an early hour, John arrived at the vicarage and was received with open arms by Mr. Ambrose and his wife. The latter seemed to forget, in the pleasure of seeing him again, that she had even once spoken doubtfully of him or hinted that he was anything short of perfection itself. And to prove how much she had done for him she communicated with great pride the squire's message, to the effect that he expected John at the Hall that very day.

John's heart leaped with delight at the idea. It was natural. He was indeed most sincerely attached to the Ambroses, and most heartily glad to be with them; but he had never in his life had an opportunity of staying in a "big" house, as he would have

described it. It seemed as though he were already beginning to taste the sweet first-fruits of success after all his labour and all his privations; it was the first taste of another world, the first mouthful of the good things of life which had fallen to his lot. Instantly there rose before him delicious visions of hot-water cans brought by a real footman, of luxurious meals served by a real butler, of soft carpets perpetually beneath his feet, of liberty to lounge in magnificent chairs in the magnificent library; and last, though not least, there was a boyish feeling of delight in the thought that when he went to see Mrs. Goddard he would go from the Hall, that she would perhaps associate him henceforth with a different kind of existence, in a word, that he was sure to acquire importance in her eyes from the fact of his visit to the squire. Many a young fellow of one and twenty is as familiar with all that money can give and as tired of luxury as a broken-down hard liver of forty years; for this is an age of luxurious living. But poor John had hardly ever tasted the least of those things too familiar to the golden youth of the period to be even noticed. He had felt when he first entered the little drawing-room of the cottage that Mrs. Goddard herself belonged, or had belonged, to that delicious unknown world of ease where the question of expense was never considered, much less mentioned. In her own eyes she was indeed living in a state approaching to penury, but the spectacle of her pictures, her furniture and her bibelots had impressed John with a very different idea. The squire's invitation, asking him to spend a week at the Hall, seemed in a moment to put him upon the same level as the woman to whom he believed himself so

devotedly attached. To his mind the ideal woman could not but be surrounded by a luxurious atmosphere of her own. To enter the charmed precincts of those surroundings seemed to John equivalent to being transported from the regions of the Theocritan to the level of the Anacreontic ode, from the pastoral, of which he had had too much, to the aristocratic, of which he felt that he could not have enough. It was a natural feeling in a very young man of his limited experience.

He stayed some hours at the vicarage. Both Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose thought him changed in the short time which had elapsed since they had seen him. He had grown more grave; he was certainly more of a man. The great contest he had just sustained with so much honour had left upon his young face its mark, an air of power which had not formerly been visible there; even his voice seemed to have grown deeper and rounder, and his words carried more weight. The good vicar, who had seen several generations of students, already distinguished in John Short the budding "don," and rubbed his hands with great satisfaction.

John asked few questions but found himself obliged to answer many concerning his recent efforts. He would have liked to say something about Mrs. Goddard, but he remembered with some awe and much aversion the circumstances in which he had last quitted the vicarage, and he held his peace; whereby he again rose in Mrs. Ambrose's estimation. He made up for his silence by speaking effusively of the squire's kindness in asking him to the Hall; forgetting perhaps the relief he had felt when he escaped from Billingsfield after Christmas without being

again obliged to shake hands with Mr. Juxon. Things looked very differently now, however. He felt himself to be somebody in the world, and that distressing sense of inferiority which had perhaps been at the root of his jealousy against the squire was gone, swallowed in the sense of triumph. His face was pale, perhaps, from overwork, but there was a brilliancy in his eyes and an incisiveness in his speech which came from the confidence of victory. He now desired nothing more than to meet the squire, feeling sure that he should receive his congratulations, and though he stayed some hours in conversation with his old friends, in imagination he was already at the Hall. The squire had not come down to meet him, as he had proposed, but he had sent his outlandish American gig with his groom to fetch John. While he was at the vicarage the latter was probably too much occupied with conversation to notice that Mr. Ambrose seemed preoccupied and changed, and the vicar was to some extent recalled to his usual manner by the presence of his pupil. Mrs. Ambrose had taxed her husband with concealing something from her ever since the previous day, but the good man was obstinate and merely said that he felt unaccountably nervous and irritable, and begged her to excuse his mood. Mrs. Ambrose postponed her cross-examination until a more favourable opportunity should present itself.

John got into the gig and drove away. He was to return with the squire to dinner in the evening, and he fully expected that Mrs. Goddard and Nellie would be of the party — it seemed hardly likely that they should be omitted. Indeed, soon after John had left a note arrived at the vicarage explaining

that Mrs. Goddard was much better and would certainly come, according to Mrs. Ambrose's very kind invitation.

It is unnecessary to dwell upon the meeting which took place between Mr. Juxon and John Short. The squire was hospitable in the extreme and expressed his great satisfaction at having John under his own roof at last. He was perhaps, like the vicar, a little nervous, but the young man did not notice it, being much absorbed by the enjoyment of his good fortune and of the mental rest he so greatly needed. Mr. Juxon congratulated him warmly and expressed a hope, amounting to certainty, that John might actually be at the head of the Tripos; to which John modestly replied that he would be quite satisfied to be in the first ten, knowing in his heart that he should be most bitterly disappointed if he were second to any one. He sat opposite to his host in a deep chair beside the fire in the library and revelled in comfort and ease, enjoying every trifle that fell in his way, feeling only a very slight diffidence in regard to himself for the present and none at all for the future. The squire was so cordial that he felt himself thoroughly at home. Indeed Mr. Juxon already rejoiced at his wisdom in asking John to the Hall. The lad was strong, hopeful, well-balanced in every respect and his presence was an admirable tonic to the almost morbid state of anxiety in which the squire had lived ever since his interview with Policeman Gall, two days before. In the sunshine of John's young personality, fears grew small and hope grew big. The ideas which had passed through Mr. Juxon's brain on the previous evening, just after Mr. Ambrose had warned him of Goddard's inten-

tions, seemed now like the evil shadows of a nightmare. All apprehension lest the convict should attempt to execute his threats disappeared like darkness before daylight, and in the course of an hour or two the squire found himself laughing and chatting with his guest as though there were no such things as forgery or convicts in the world. The afternoon passed very pleasantly between the examination of Mr. Juxon's treasures and the conversation those objects elicited. For John, who was an accomplished scholar, had next to no knowledge of bibliology and took delight in seeing for the first time many a rare edition which he had heard mentioned or had read of in the course of his studies. He would not have believed that he could be now talking on such friendly terms with a man for whom he had once felt the strongest antipathy, and Mr. Juxon on his part felt that in their former meetings he had not done full justice to the young man's undoubted talents.

As they drove down to the vicarage that evening Mrs. Goddard's name was mentioned for the first time. John, with a fine affectation of indifference, asked how she was.

"She has not been very well lately," answered Mr. Juxon.

"What has been the matter?" inquired John, who could not see his companion's face in the dark shade of the trees.

"Headache, I believe," returned the squire laconically, and silence ensued for a few moments. "I should not wonder if it rained again this evening," he added presently as they passed through the park gate, out into the road. The sky was black and it

was hard to see anything beyond the yellow streak of light which fell from the lamps and ran along the road before the gig.

"If it turns out a fine night, don't come for us. We will walk home," said the squire to the groom as they descended before the vicarage and Stamboul, who had sat on the floor between them, sprang down to the ground.

John was startled when he met Mrs. Goddard. He was amazed at the change in her appearance for which no one had prepared him. She met him indeed very cordially but he felt as though she were not the same woman he had known so short a time before. There was still in her face that delicate pathetic expression which had at first charmed him, there was still the same look in her eyes; but what had formerly seemed so attractive seemed now exaggerated. Her cheeks looked wan and hollow and there were deep shadows about her eyes and temples; her lips had lost their colour and the lines about her mouth had suddenly become apparent where John had not before suspected them. She looked ten years older as she put her thin hand in his and smiled pleasantly at his greeting. Some trite phrase about the "ravages of time" crossed John's mind and gave him a disagreeable sensation, for which it was hard to account. He felt as though his dream were suddenly dead and a strange reality had taken life in its place. Could this be she to whom he had written verses by the score, at whose smile he had swelled with pride, at whose careless laugh he had trembled with shame? She was terribly changed, she looked positively old — what John called old. As he sat by her side talking and wondering whether he would fall back into those same

grooves of conversation he had associated with her formerly, he felt something akin to pity for her, which he had certainly never expected to feel. She was not the same as before — even the tone of her voice was different; she was gentle, pathetic, endowed even now with many charms, but she was not the woman he had dreamed of and tried to speak to of the love he fancied was in his heart. She talked — yes; but there were long pauses, and her eyes wandered strangely from him, often towards the windows of the vicarage drawing-room, often towards the doors; her answers were not always to the point and her interest seemed to flag in what was said. John could not fail to notice too that both Mr. Ambrose and Mr. Juxon treated her with the kind of attention which is bestowed upon invalids, and the vicar's wife was constantly doing something to make her comfortable, offering her a footstool, shading the light from her eyes, asking if she felt any draught where she sat. These were things no one had formerly thought of doing for Mrs. Goddard, who in spite of her sad face had been used to laugh merrily enough with the rest, and whose lithe figure had seemed to John the embodiment of youthful activity. At last he ventured to ask her a question.

"Have you been ill, Mrs. Goddard?" he inquired in a voice full of interest. Her soft eyes glanced uneasily at him. He was now the only one of the party who was not in some degree acquainted with her troubles.

"Oh no!" she answered nervously. "Only a little headache. It always makes me quite wretched when I have it."

"Yes. I often have headaches, too," answered John. "The squire told me as we came down."

"What did he tell you?" asked Mrs. Goddard so quickly as to startle her companion.

"Oh — only that you had not been very well. Where is it that you suffer?" he asked sympathetically. "I think it is worst when it seems to be in the very centre of one's head, like a red-hot nail being driven in with a hammer — is that like what you feel?"

"I — yes, I daresay. I don't quite know," she answered, her eyes wandering uneasily about the room. "I suppose you have dreadful headaches over your work, do you not, Mr. Short?" she added quickly, feeling that she must say something.

"Oh, it is all over now," said John rather proudly. But as he leaned back in his chair he said to himself that this meeting was not precisely what he had anticipated; the subject of headaches might have a fine interest in its way, but he had expected to have talked of more tender things. To his own great surprise he felt no desire to do so, however. He had not recovered from the shock of seeing that Mrs. Goddard had grown old.

"Yes," said she, kindly. "How glad you must be! To have done so splendidly too — you must feel that you have realised a magnificent dream."

"No," said John. "I cannot say I do. I have done the thing I meant to do, or I have good reason to believe that I have; but I have not realised my dream. I shall never write any more odes, Mrs. Goddard."

"Why not? Oh, you mean to me, Mr. Short?" she added with something of her old manner. "Well, you know, it is much better that you should not."

"Perhaps so," answered John rather sadly. "I

don't know. Frankly, Mrs. Goddard, did not you sometimes think I was very foolish last Christmas?"

"Very," she said, smiling at him kindly. "But I think you have changed. I think you are more of a man, now — you have something more serious — "

"I used to think I was very serious, and so I was," said John, with the air of a man who refers to the follies of his long past youth. "Do you remember how angry I was when you wanted me to skate with Miss Nellie?"

"Oh, I only said that to teaze you," Mrs. Goddard answered. "I daresay you would be angry now, if I suggested the same thing."

"No," said John quietly. "I do not believe I should be. As you say, I feel very much older now than I did then."

"The older we grow the more we like youth," said Mary Goddard, unconsciously uttering one of the fundamental truths of human nature, and at the same time so precisely striking the current of John's thoughts that he started. He was wondering within himself why it was that she now seemed too old for him, whereas a few short months ago she had seemed to be of his own age.

"How true that is!" he exclaimed. Mrs. Goddard laughed faintly.

"You are not old enough to have reached that point yet, Mr. Short," she said. "Really, here we are moralising like a couple of old philosophers!"

"This is a moralising season," answered John. "When we last met, it was all holly-berries and Christmas and plum-pudding."

"How long ago that seems!" exclaimed the poor lady with a sigh.

"Ages!" echoed John, sighing in his turn, but not so much for sadness, it may be, as from relief that the great struggle was over. That time of anxiety and terrible effort seemed indeed very far removed from him, but its removal was a cause of joy rather than of sadness. He sighed like a man who, sitting over his supper, remembers the hard fought race he has won in the afternoon, feeling yet in his limbs the ability to race and win again but feeling in his heart the delicious consciousness that the question of his superiority has been decided beyond all dispute.

"And now you will stay here a long time, of course," said Mrs. Goddard presently.

"I am stopping at the Hall, just now," said John with a distinct sense of the importance of the fact, "and after a week I shall stay here a few days. Then I shall go to London to see my father."

"No one will be so glad as he to hear of your success."

"No indeed. I really think it is more for his sake that I want to be actually first," said John. "Do you know, I have so often thought how he will look when I meet him and tell him I am the senior classic."

John's voice trembled and as Mrs. Goddard looked at him, she thought she saw a moisture in his eyes. It pleased her to see it, for it showed that John Short had more heart than she had imagined.

"I can fancy that," she said, warmly. "I envy you that moment."

Presently the squire came over to where they were sitting and joined them; and then Mrs. Ambrose spoke to John, and Nellie came and asked him ques-

tions. Strange to say John felt none of that annoyance which he formerly felt when his conversations with Mrs. Goddard were interrupted, and he talked with Nellie and Mrs. Ambrose quite as readily as with her. He felt very calm and happy that night, as though he had done with the hard labour of life. In half an hour he had realised that he was no more in love with Mrs. Goddard than he was with Mrs. Ambrose, and he was trying to explain to himself how it was that he had ever believed in such a palpable absurdity. Love was doubtless blind, he thought, but he was surely not so blind as to overlook the evidences of Mrs. Goddard's age. All the dreams of that morning faded away before the sight of her face, and so deep is the turpitude of the best of human hearts that John was almost ashamed of having once thought he loved her. That was probably the best possible proof that his love had been but a boyish fancy.

What the little party at the vicarage would have been like, if John's presence had not animated it, would be hard to say. The squire and Mr. Ambrose treated Mrs. Goddard with the sort of paternal but solemn care which is usually bestowed either upon great invalids or upon persons bereaved of some very dear relation. The two elder men occasionally looked at her and exchanged glances when they were not observed by Mrs. Ambrose, wondering perhaps what would next befall the unfortunate lady and whether she could bear much more of the excitement and anxiety to which she had of late been subjected. On the whole the conversation was far from being lively, and Mrs. Goddard herself felt that it was a relief when the hour came for going home.

The vicar had ordered his dog-cart for her and Nellie, but as the night had turned out better than had been expected Mr. Juxon's groom had not come down from the Hall. Both he and John would be glad of the walk; it had not rained for two days and the roads were dry.

"Look here," said the squire, as they rose to take their leave, "Mr. Short had better go as far as the cottage in the dog-cart, to see Mrs. Goddard home. I will go ahead on foot — I shall probably be there as soon as you. There is not room for us all, and somebody must go with her, you know. Besides," he added, "I have got Stamboul with me."

Mrs. Goddard, who was standing beside the squire, laid her hand beseechingly upon his arm.

"Oh, pray don't," she said in low voice. "Why have you not got your carriage?"

"Never mind me," he answered in the same tone. "I am all right, I like to walk."

Before she could say anything more, he had shaken hands with Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose and was gone. Perhaps in his general determination to be good to everybody he fancied that John would enjoy the short drive with Mrs. Goddard better than the walk with himself.

But when he was gone, Mrs. Goddard grew very nervous. One of her wraps could not be found, and while search was being made for it the motherly Mrs. Ambrose insisted upon giving her something hot, in the way of brandy and water. She looked very ill, but showed the strongest desire to go. It was no matter about the shawl, she said; Mr. Ambrose could send it in the morning; but the thing was found and at last Mrs. Goddard and Nellie and John got into

the dog-cart with old Reynolds and drove off. All these things consumed some time.

The squire on the other hand strode briskly forward towards the cottage, not wishing to keep John waiting for him. As he walked his mind wandered back to the consideration of the almost tragic events which were occurring in the peaceful village. He forgot all about John, as he looked up at the half moon which struggled to give some light through the driving clouds; he fell to thinking of Mrs. Goddard and to wondering where her husband might be lying hidden. The road was lonely and he walked fast, with Stamboul close at his heel. The dog-cart did not overtake him before he reached the cottage, and he forgot all about it. By sheer force of habit he opened the white gate and, closing it behind him, entered the park alone.

CHAPTER XIX.

JOHN'S impression of Mrs. Goddard was strengthened by the scene at the vicarage at the moment of leaving. The extraordinary nervousness she betrayed, the anxiety for her welfare shown by Mrs. Ambrose and the grave face of the vicar all favoured the idea that she had become an invalid since he had last met her. He himself fell into the manner of those about him and spoke in low tones and moved delicately as though fearing to offend her sensitive nerves. The vicar alone understood the situation and had been very much surprised at the squire's sudden determination to walk home; he would gladly have seized his hat and run after his friend, but he feared Mrs. Ambrose's curiosity and moreover on reflection felt sure that the dog-cart would overtake Mr. Juxon before he was half way to the cottage. He was very far from suspecting him of the absence of mind which he actually displayed, but it was a great relief to him to see the little party safe in the dog-cart and on the way homeward.

Mrs. Goddard was on the front seat with old Reynolds, and John, who would have preferred to sit by her side a few months ago, was glad to find himself behind with Nellie. It was a curious instinct, but he felt it strongly and was almost grateful to the old man for stolidly keeping his seat. So he sat beside Nellie and talked to her, to the child's intense

delight; she had not enjoyed the evening very much, for she felt the general sense of oppression as keenly as children always feel such things, and she had long exhausted the slender stock of illustrated books which lay upon the table in the vicarage drawing-room.

"There is no more skating now," said John. "What do you do to amuse yourselves?"

"I am studying history with mamma," answered Nellie, "and that takes ever so much time, you know. And then — oh, we are beginning to think of the spring, and we look after the violet plants in the frames."

"It does not feel much like spring," remarked John.

"No — and mamma has not been well lately, so we have not done much of anything."

"Has she been ill long?" asked John.

"No — oh no! Only the last two or three days, ever since — " Nellie stopped herself. Her mother had told her not to mention the tramp's visit.

"Ever since when?" asked John, becoming suddenly interested.

"Ever since the last time the Ambroses came to tea," said Nellie with a readiness beyond her years. "But she looks dreadfully, does not she?"

"Dreadfully," answered John. Then, leaning back and turning his head he spoke to Mrs. Goddard. "I hope you are quite warm enough?" he said.

"Quite — thanks," answered she, but her voice sounded tremulous in the night. It might have been the shaking of the dog-cart. In a few minutes they drew up before the door of the cottage. John sprang to the ground and almost lifted Mrs. Goddard from the high seat.

"Where is Mr. Juxon?" she asked anxiously.

John looked round, peering into the gloom. A black cloud driven by the strong east wind was passing over the moon, and for some moments it was almost impossible to see anything. The squire was nowhere to be seen. John turned and helped Nellie off the back seat of the dog-cart.

"I am afraid we must have passed him," he said quietly. Formerly Mrs. Goddard's tone of anxiety as she asked for the squire would have roused John's resentment; he now thought nothing of it. Reynolds prepared to move off.

"Won't you please wait a moment, Reynolds?" said Mrs. Goddard, going close to the old man. She could not have told why she asked him to stay, it was a nervous impulse.

"Why?" asked John. "You know I am going to the Hall."

"Yes, of course. I only thought, perhaps, you and Mr. Juxon would like to drive up — it is so dark. I am sure Mr. Ambrose would not mind you taking the gentlemen up to the Hall, Reynolds?"

"No m'm. I'm quite sure as he wouldn't," exclaimed Reynolds with great alacrity. He immediately had visions of a pint of beer in the Hall kitchen.

"You do not think Mr. Juxon may have gone on alone, Mr. Short?" said Mrs. Goddard, leaning upon the wicket gate. Her face looked very pale in the gloom.

"No — it would be very odd if he did," replied John, who had his hands in his greatcoat pockets and slowly stamped one foot after another on the hard ground, to keep himself warm.

"Then we must have passed him on the road,"

said Mrs. Goddard. "But I was so sure I saw nobody—"

"I think he will come presently," answered John in a reassuring tone. "Why do you wait, Mrs. Goddard? You must be cold, and it is dangerous for you to be out here. Don't wait, Reynolds," he added; "we will walk up."

"Oh please don't," cried Mrs. Goddard, imploringly.

John looked at her in some surprise. The cloud suddenly passed from before the moon and he could see her anxious upturned face quite plainly. He could not in the least understand the cause of her anxiety, but he supposed her nervousness was connected with her indisposition. Reynolds on his part, being anxious for beer, showed no disposition to move, but sat with stolid indifference, loosely holding the reins while Strawberry, the old mare, hung down her head and stamped from time to time in a feeble and antiquated fashion. For some minutes there was total silence. Not a step was to be heard upon the road, not a sound of any kind, save the strong east wind rushing past the cottage and losing itself among the withered oaks of the park opposite.

Suddenly a deep and bell-mouthed note resounded through the air. Strawberry started in the shafts and trembled violently.

"Stamboul! Stamboul!" The squire's ringing voice was heard far up the park. The bloodhound's distant baying suddenly ceased. John thought he heard a fainter cry, inarticulate, and full of distress, through the sighing wind. Then there was silence again. Mrs. Goddard leaned back against the wicket

gate, and Nellie, startled by the noises, pressed close to her mother's side.

"Why — he has gone up the park!" exclaimed John in great surprise. "He was calling to his dog —"

"Oh, Mr. Short!" cried Mrs. Goddard in agonised tones, as soon as she could speak, "I am sure something dreadful has happened — do go, Mr. Short — do go and see —"

Something of the extreme alarm that sounded in her voice seized upon John.

"Stay with Mrs. Goddard, Reynolds," he said quickly and darted across the road towards the park gate. John was strong and active. He laid his hands upon the highest rails and vaulted lightly over, then ran at the top of his speed up the dark avenue.

Mr. Juxon, in his absence of mind, had gone through the gate alone, swinging his blackthorn stick in his hand, Stamboul stalking at his heel in the gloom. He was a fearless man and the presence of John during the afternoon had completely dissolved that nervous presentiment of evil he had felt before his guest's coming. But in the short walk of scarcely half a mile, from the vicarage to the cottage, his thoughts had become entirely absorbed in considering Mrs. Goddard's strange position, and for the moment John was quite forgotten. He entered the park and the long iron latch of the wooden gate fell into its socket behind him with a sharp click. Mr. Juxon walked quickly on and Stamboul trod noiselessly behind him. At about a hundred yards from the gate the avenue turned sharply to the right, winding about a little elevation in the ground, where the

trees stood thicker than elsewhere. As he came towards this hillock the strong east wind blew sharply behind him. Had the wind been in the opposite direction, Stamboul's sharp nostrils would have scented danger. As it was he gave no sign but stalked solemnly at the squire's heels. The faint light of the half moon was obscured at that moment, as has been seen, by a sweeping cloud. The squire turned to the right and tramped along the hard road.

At the darkest spot in the way a man sprang out suddenly before him and struck a quick blow at his head with something heavy. But it was very dark. The blow was aimed at his head, but fell upon the heavy padded frieze of his ulster greatcoat, grazing the brim of his hat as it passed and knocking it off his head. Mr. Juxon staggered and reeled to one side. At the same instant — it all happened in the space of two seconds, Stamboul sprang past his master and his bulk, striking the squire at the shoulder just as he was staggering from the blow he had received, sent him rolling into the ditch; by the same cause the hound's direction as he leaped was just so changed that he missed his aim and bounded past the murderer into the darkness. Before the gigantic beast could recover himself and turn to spring again, Walter Goddard, who had chanced never to see Stamboul and little suspected his presence, leaped the ditch and fled rapidly through the dark shadow. But death was at his heels. Before the squire, who was very little hurt, could get upon his feet, the bloodhound had found the scent and, uttering his deep-mouthed baying note, sprang upon the track of the flying man. Mr. Juxon got across the ditch and followed him into the gloom.

"Stamboul! Stamboul!" he roared as he ran. But before he had gone thirty yards he heard a heavy fall. The hound's cry ceased and a short scream broke the silence.

A moment later the squire was dragging the infuriated animal from the prostrate body of Walter Goddard. Stamboul had tasted blood; it was no easy matter to make him relinquish his prey. The cloud passed from the moon, driven before the blast, and a ray of light fell through the trees upon the scene. Juxon stood wrestling with his hound, holding to his heavy collar with both hands with all his might. He dared not let go for an instant, well knowing that the frenzied beast would tear his victim limb from limb. But Juxon's hands were strong, and though Stamboul writhed and his throat rattled he could not free himself. The squire glanced at the body of the fallen man, just visible in the flickering moonlight. Walter Goddard lay quite still upon his back. If he was badly wounded it was not possible to say where the wound was.

It was a terrible moment. Mr. Juxon felt that he could not leave the man thus, not knowing whether he were alive or dead; and yet while all his strength was exerted to the full in controlling the bloodhound, it was impossible to approach a step nearer. He was beginning to think that he should be obliged to take Stamboul to the Hall and return again to the scene of the disaster.

"Mr. Juxon! Juxon! Juxon!" John was shouting as he ran up the park.

"This way! look sharp!" yelled the squire, foreseeing relief. John's quick footsteps rang on the hard road. The squire called again and in a moment

the young man had joined him and stood horror-struck at what he saw.

"Don't touch the dog!" cried the squire. "Don't come near him, I say!" he added as John came forward. "There — there has been an accident, Mr. Short," he added in calmer tones. "Would you mind seeing if the fellow is alive?"

John was too much startled to say anything, but he went and knelt down by Goddard's body and looked into his face.

"Feel his pulse," said the squire. "Listen at his heart." To him it seemed a very simple matter to ascertain whether a man were alive or dead. But John was nervous; he had never seen a dead man in his life and felt that natural repulsion to approaching death which is common to all living creatures. There was no help for it, however, and he took Walter Goddard's limp hand in his and tried to find his pulse; he could not distinguish any beating. The hand fell nerveless to the ground.

"I think he is dead," said John very softly, and he rose to his feet and drew back a little way from the body.

"Then just wait five minutes for me, if you do not mind," said Mr. Juxon, and he turned away dragging the reluctant and still struggling Stamboul by his side.

John shuddered when he was left alone. It was indeed a dismal scene enough. At his feet lay Walter Goddard's body, faintly illuminated by the struggling moonbeams; all around and overhead the east wind was howling and whistling and sighing in the dry oak branches, whirling hither and thither the few brown leaves that had clung to their hold throughout

the long winter; the sound of the squire's rapidly retreating footsteps grew more faint in the distance; John felt that he was alone and was very uncomfortable. He would have liked to go back to the cottage and tell Mrs. Goddard of what had happened, and that Mr. Juxon was safe; but he thought the squire might return and find that he had left his post and accuse him of cowardice. He drew back from the man's body and sheltered himself from the wind, leaning against the broad trunk of an old oak tree. He had not stood thus many minutes when he heard the sound of wheels upon the hard road. It might be Mrs. Goddard, he thought. With one more glance at the prostrate body, he turned away and hurried through the trees towards the avenue. The bright lamps of the dog-cart were almost close before him. He shouted to Reynolds.

"Whoa, January!" ejaculated that ancient functionary as he pulled up Strawberry close to John Short. Why the natives of Essex and especially of Billingsfield habitually address their beasts of burden as "January" is a matter best left to the discrimination of philologers; obedient to the familiar words however, Strawberry stood still in the middle of the road. John could see that Mrs. Goddard was seated by the side of Reynolds but that Nellie was not in the cart.

"Oh, Mrs. Goddard, is that you?" said John. "Mr. Juxon will be here in a moment. Don't be frightened — he is not hurt in the least; awfully bad luck for the tramp, though!"

"The tramp?" repeated Mrs. Goddard with a faint cry of horror.

"Yes," said John, whose spirits rose wonderfully

in the light of the dog-cart lamps. "There was a poor tramp hanging about the park — poaching, very likely — and Mr. Juxon's dog got after him, somehow, I suppose. I do not know how it happened, but when I came up — oh! here is Mr. Juxon himself — he will tell you all about it."

The squire came up in breathless haste, having locked Stamboul into the house.

"Good Heavens! Mrs. Goddard!" he ejaculated in a tone of profound surprise. But Mrs. Goddard gave no answer. The squire sprang upon the step and looked closely at her. She lay back against old Reynolds's shoulder, very pale, with her eyes shut. It was evident that she had fainted. The old man seemed not to comprehend what had happened; he had never experienced the sensation of having a lady leaning upon his shoulder, and he looked down at her with a half idiotic smile on his deeply furrowed face.

"She's took wuss, sir," he remarked. "She was all for comin' up the park as soon as Master John was gone. She warn't feelin' herself o' no account t' evenin'."

"Look here, Mr. Short," said the squire decisively. "I must ask you to take Mrs. Goddard home again and call her women to look after her. I fancy she will come to herself before long. Do you mind?"

"Not in the least," said John cheerfully, mounting at the back of the dog-cart.

"And — Reynolds — bring Mr. Short back to the Hall immediately, please, and you shall have some beer."

"All right, sir."

John supported the fainting lady with one arm,

turning round upon his seat at the back. Old Strawberry wheeled quickly in her tracks and trotted down the avenue under the evident impression that she was going home. Mr. Juxon dashed across the ditch again to the place where Walter Goddard had fallen.

The squire knelt down and tried to ascertain the extent of the man's injuries; as far as he could see there was a bad wound at his throat, and one hand was much mangled. But there seemed to have been no great flow of blood. He tore open the smock-frock and shirt and put his ear to the heart. Faintly, very faintly, he could hear it beat. Walter Goddard was alive still — alive to live for years perhaps, the squire reflected; to live in a prison, it was true, but to live. To describe his feelings in that moment would be impossible. Had he found the convict dead, it would be useless to deny that he would have felt a very great satisfaction, tempered perhaps by some pity for the wretched man's miserable end, but still very great. It would have seemed such a just end, after all; to be killed in the attempt to kill, and to have died not by the squire's hand but by the sharp strong jaws of the hound who had once before saved the squire's life. But he was alive. It would not take much to kill him; a little pressure on his wounded throat would be enough. Even to leave him there, uncared for, till morning in the bleak wind, lying upon the cold ground, would be almost certain to put an end to his life. But to the honour of Charles James Juxon be it said that such thoughts never crossed his mind. He pulled off his heavy ulster greatcoat, wrapped it about the felon's insensible body, then, kneeling, raised up his head and shoulders, got his strong arms well round him and

with some difficulty rose to his feet. Once upright, it was no hard matter to carry his burthen through the trees to the road, and up the avenue to his own door.

"Holmes," said Mr. Juxon to his butler, "this man is badly hurt, but he is alive. Help me to carry him upstairs."

There was that in the squire's voice which brooked neither question nor delay when he was in earnest. The solemn butler took Walter Goddard by the feet and the squire took him by the shoulders; so they carried him up to a bedroom and laid him down, feeling for the bed in the dark as they moved. Holmes then lit a candle with great calmness.

"Shall I send for the medical man, sir?" he asked quietly.

"Yes. Send the gig as fast as possible. If he is not at home, or cannot be found, send on to the town. If anybody asks questions say the man is a tramp who attacked me in the park and Stamboul pulled him down. Send at once, and bring me some brandy and light the fire here."

"Yes, sir," said Holmes, and left the room.

Mr. Juxon lighted other candles and examined the injured man. There was now no doubt that he was alive. He breathed faintly but regularly; his pulse beat less rapidly and more firmly. His face was deadly pale and very thin, and his half-opened eyes stared unconsciously upwards, but they were not glazed nor death-like. He seemed to have lost little blood, comparatively speaking.

"Bah!" ejaculated the squire. "I believe he is only badly frightened, after all."

Holmes brought brandy and warm water and again left the room. Mr. Juxon bathed Goddard's face

and neck with a sponge, eying him suspiciously all the while. It would not have surprised him at any moment if he had leaped from the bed and attempted to escape. To guard against surprise, the squire locked the door and put the key in his pocket, watching the convict to see whether he noticed the act or was really unconscious. But Goddard never moved nor turned his motionless eyeballs. Mr. Juxon returned to his side, and with infinite care began to remove his clothes. They were almost in rags. He examined each article, and was surprised to find money in the pockets, amounting to nearly sixty pounds; then he smiled to himself, remembering that the convict had visited his wife and had doubtless got the money from her to aid him in his escape. He put the notes and gold carefully together in a drawer after counting them, and returning to his occupation succeeded at last in putting Goddard to bed, after staunching his wounds as well as he could with handkerchiefs.

He stood long by the bedside, watching the man's regular breathing, and examining his face attentively. Many strange thoughts passed through his mind, as he stood there, looking at the man who had caused such misery to himself, such shame and sorrow to his fair wife, such disappointment to the honest man who was now trying to save him from the very grasp of death. So this was Mary Goddard's husband, little Nellie's father — this grimy wretch, whose foul rags lay heaped there in the corner, whose miserable head pressed the spotless linen of the pillow, whose half-closed eyes stared up so senselessly at the squire's face. This was the man for whose sake Mary Goddard started and turned

pale, fainted and grew sick, languished and suffered so much pain. No wonder she concealed it from Nellie — no wonder she had feared lest after many years he should come back and claim her for his wife — no wonder either that a man with such a face should do bad deeds.

Mr. Juxon was a judge of faces; persons accustomed for many years to command men usually are. He noted Walter Goddard's narrow jaw and pointed chin, his eyes set near together, his wicked lips, parted and revealing sharp jagged teeth, his ill-shaped ears and shallow temples, his flat low forehead, shown off by his cropped hair. And yet this man had once been called handsome, he had been admired and courted. But then his hair had hidden the shape of his head, his long golden moustache had covered his mouth and disguised all his lower features, he had been arrayed by tailors of artistic merit, and he had had much gold in his pockets. He was a very different object now — the escaped convict, close cropped, with a half-grown beard upon his ill-shaped face, and for all ornament a linen sheet drawn up under his chin.

The squire was surprised that he did not recover consciousness, seeing that he breathed regularly and was no longer so pale as at first. A faint flush seemed to rise to his sunken cheeks, and for a long time Mr. Juxon stood beside him, expecting every moment that he would speak. Once he thought his lips moved a little. Then Mr. Juxon took a little brandy in a spoon and raising his head poured it down his throat. The effect was immediate. Goddard opened wide his eyes, the blood mounted to his cheeks with a deep flush, and he uttered an inarticulate sound.

"What did you say?" asked the squire, bending over him.

But there was no answer. The sick man's head fell back upon the pillow, though his eyes remained wide open and the flush did not leave his cheeks. His pulse was now very high, and his breathing grew heavy and stertorous.

"I hope I have not made him any worse," remarked Mr. Juxon aloud, as he contemplated his patient. "But if he is going to die, I wish he would die now."

The thought was charitable, on the whole. If Walter Goddard died then and there, he would be buried in a nameless grave under the shadow of the old church; no one would ever know that he was the celebrated forger, the escaped convict, the husband of Mary Goddard. If he lived — heaven alone knew what complications would follow if he lived.

There was a knock at the door. Mr. Juxon drew the key from his pocket and opened it. Holmes the butler stood outside.

"Mr. Short has come back, sir. He asked if you wished to see him."

"Ask him to come here," replied the squire, to whom the tension of keeping his solitary watch was becoming very irksome. In a few moments John entered the room, looking pale and nervous.

CHAPTER XX.

JOHN SHORT was in absolute ignorance of what was occurring. He attributed Mrs. Goddard's anxiety to her solicitude for Mr. Juxon, and if he had found time to give the matter serious consideration, he would have argued very naturally that she was fond of the squire. It had been less easy than the latter had supposed to take her home and persuade her to stay there, for she was in a state in which she hardly understood reason. Nothing but John's repeated assurances to the effect that Mr. Juxon was not in the least hurt, and that he would send her word of the condition of the wounded tramp, prevailed upon her to remain at the cottage; for she had come back to consciousness before the dog-cart was fairly out of the park and had almost refused to enter her own home.

The catastrophe had happened, after eight and forty hours of suspense, and her position was one of extreme fear and doubt. She had indeed seen the squire at the very moment when she fainted, but the impression was uncertain as that of a dream, and it required all John's asseverations to persuade her that Mr. Juxon had actually met her and insisted that she should return to the cottage. Once there, in her own house, she abandoned herself to the wildest excitement, shutting herself into the drawing-room and refusing to see anyone; she gave way to all her sor-

row and fear, feeling that if she controlled herself any longer she must go mad. Indeed it was the best thing she could do, for her nerves were overstrained, and the hysterical weeping which now completely overpowered her for some time, was the natural relief to her overwrought system. She had not the slightest doubt that the tramp of whom John had spoken, and whom he had described as badly hurt, was her husband; and together with her joy at Mr. Juxon's escape, she felt an intolerable anxiety to know Walter's fate. If in ordinary circumstances she had been informed that he had died in prison, it would have been absurd to expect her to give way to any expressions of excessive grief; she would perhaps have shed a few womanly tears and for some time she would have been more sad than usual; but she no longer loved him and his death could only be regarded as a release from all manner of trouble and shame and evil foreboding. With his decease would have ended her fears for poor Nellie, her apprehensions for the future in case he should return and claim her, the whole weight of her humiliation, and if she was too kind to have rejoiced over such a termination of her woes, she was yet too sensible not to have fully understood and appreciated the fact of her liberation and of the freedom given to the child she loved, by the death of a father whose return could bring nothing but disgrace. But now she did not know whether Walter were alive or dead. If he was alive he was probably so much injured as to preclude all possibility of his escaping, and he must inevitably be given up to justice, no longer to imprisonment merely, but by his own confession to suffer the death of a murderer. If on the other hand he was already

dead, he had died a death less shameful indeed, but of which the circumstances were too horrible for his wife to contemplate, for he must have been torn to pieces by Stamboul the bloodhound.

She unconsciously comprehended all these considerations, which entirely deprived her of the power to weigh them in her mind, for her mind was temporarily loosed from all control of the reasoning faculty. She had borne much during the last three days, but she could bear no more; intellect and sensibility were alike exhausted and gave way together. There were indeed moments, intervals in the fits of hysteric tears and acute mental torture, when she lay quite still in her chair and vaguely asked herself what it all meant, but her disturbed consciousness gave no answer to the question, and presently her tears broke out afresh and she tossed wildly from side to side, or walked hurriedly up and down the room, wringing her hands in despair, sobbing aloud in her agony and again abandoning herself to the uncontrolled exaggerations of her grief and terror. One consolation alone presented itself at intervals to her confused intelligence; Mr. Juxon was safe. Whatever other fearful thing had happened, he was safe, saved perhaps by her warning — but what was that, if Walter had escaped death only to die at the hands of the hangman, or had found it in the jaws of that fearful bloodhound? What was the safety even of her best friend, if poor Nellie was to know that her father was alive, only to learn that he was to die again?

But human suffering cannot outlast human strength; as a marvellous adjustment of forces has ordered that even at the pole, in the regions of boundless and perpetual cold, the sea shall not freeze to the

bottom, so there is also in human nature a point beyond which suffering cannot extend. The wildest emotions must expend themselves in time, the fiercest passions must burn out. At the end of two hours Mary Goddard was exhausted by the vehemence of her hysteric fear, and woke as from a dream to a dull sense of reality. She knew, now that some power of reflection was restored to her, that the squire would give her intelligence of what had happened, so soon as he was able, and she knew also that she must wait until the morning before any such message could reach her. She took the candle from the table and went upstairs. Nellie was asleep, but her mother felt a longing to look at her again that night, not knowing what misery for her child the morrow might bring forth.

Nellie lay asleep in her bed, her rich brown hair plaited together and thrown back across the pillow. The long dark fringes of her eyelashes cast a shade upon the transparent colour of her cheek, and the light breath came softly through her parted lips. But as Mary Goddard looked she saw that there were still tears upon her lovely face and that the pillow was still wet. She had cried herself to sleep, for Martha had told her that her mother was very ill and would not see her that night; Nellie was accustomed to say her prayers at her mother's knee every evening before going to bed, she was used to having her mother smooth her pillow and kiss her and put out her light, leaving her with sweet words, to wake her with sweet words on the next morning, and to-night she had missed all this and had been told moreover that her mother was very ill and was acting very strangely. She had gone to bed and had cried her-

self to sleep, and the tears were still upon her cheeks. Shading the light carefully from the child's eyes, Mary Goddard bent down and kissed her forehead once and then feeling that her sorrow was rising again she turned and passed noiselessly from the room.

But Nellie was dreaming peacefully and knew nothing of her mother's visit; she slept on not knowing that scarcely a quarter of a mile away her own father, whom she had been taught to think of as dead, was lying at the Hall, wounded and unconscious while half the detectives in the kingdom were looking for him. Had Nellie known that, her sleep would have been little and her dreams few.

There was little rest at the Hall that night. When Reynolds had driven John back to the great house he found his way to the kitchen and got his beer, and he became at once a centre of interest, being overwhelmed with questions concerning the events of the evening. But he was able to say very little except that while waiting before the cottage he had heard strange noises from the park, that Master John had run up the avenue, that Mrs. Goddard had taken Miss Nellie into the house and had then insisted upon being driven towards the Hall, that they had met Master John and the squire and that Mrs. Goddard had been "took wuss."

Meanwhile John entered the room where Mr. Juxon was watching over Walter Goddard. John looked pale and nervous; he had not recovered from the unpleasant sensation of being left alone with what he believed to be a dead body, in the struggling moonlight and the howling wind. He was by no means timid by nature, but young nerves are not so tough as old ones and he had felt exceedingly uncomfortable.

He stood a moment within the room, then glanced at the bed and started with surprise.

"Why—he is not dead after all!" he exclaimed, and going nearer he looked hard at Goddard's flushed face.

"No," said Mr. Juxon, "he is not dead. He may be dying for all I know. I have sent for the doctor."

"Was he much hurt?" asked John, still looking at the sick man. "He looks to me as though he were in a fever."

"He does not seem so badly hurt. I cannot make it out at all. At first I thought he was badly frightened, but I cannot bring him to consciousness. Perhaps he has a fever, as you say. This is a most unpleasant experience, Mr. Short—your first night at the Hall, too. Of course I am bound to look after the man, as Stamboul did the damage—it would have served him right if he had been killed. It was a villainous blow he gave me—I can feel it still. The moral of it is that one should always wear a thick ulster when one walks alone at night."

"I did not know he struck you," said John in some surprise.

"Jumped out of the copse at the turning and struck at me with a bludgeon," said Mr. Juxon. "Knocked my hat off, into the bargain, and then ran away with Stamboul after him. If I had not come up in time there would have been nothing left of him."

"I should say the dog saved your life," remarked John, much impressed by the squire's unadorned tale. "What object can the fellow have had in attacking you? Strange—his eyes are open, but he does not seem to understand us."

Mr. Juxon walked to the bedside and contemplated the sick man's features with undisguised disgust.

"You villain!" he said roughly. "Why don't you answer for yourself?" The man did not move, and the squire began to pace the room. John was struck by Mr. Juxon's tone: it was not like him, he thought, to speak in that way to a helpless creature. He could not understand it. There was a long silence, broken only by the heavy breathing of Goddard.

"Really, Mr. Short," said the squire at last, "I have no intention of keeping you up all night. The village doctor must have been out. It may be more than an hour before my man finds another."

"Never mind," said John quietly. "I will wait till he comes at all events. You may need me before it is over."

"Do you think he looks as if he were going to die?" asked the squire doubtfully, as he again approached the bedside.

"I don't know," answered John, standing on the other side. "I never saw any one die. He looks very ill."

"Very ill. I have seen many people die — but somehow I have a strong impression that this fellow will live."

"Let us hope so," said John.

"Well —" The squire checked himself. Probably the hope he would have expressed would not have coincided with that to which John had given utterance. "Well," he repeated, "I daresay he will. Mr. Short, are you at all nervous? Since you are so good as to say you will wait until the doctor comes, would you mind very much being left alone here for five minutes?"

"No," answered John, stoutly, "not in the least." To be left in a well-lighted room by the bedside of

Walter Goddard, ill indeed, but alive and breathing vigorously, was very different from being requested to watch his apparently dead body out in the park under the moonlight.

With a word of thanks, the squire left the room, and hastened to his study, where he proceeded to write a note, as follows: —

"My dear Mr. Ambrose — The man we were speaking of yesterday morning actually attacked me this evening. Stamboul worried him badly, but he is not dead. He is lying here, well cared for, and I have sent for the doctor. If convenient to you, would you come in the morning? I need not recommend discretion. — Sincerely yours,

"C. J. Juxon.

"*N.B.* — I am not hurt."

Having ascertained that Reynolds was still in the kitchen, the missive was given to the old man with an injunction to use all speed, as the vicar might be going to bed and the note was important.

John, meanwhile, being left alone sat down near the wounded man's bed and waited, glancing at the flushed face and staring eyes from time to time, and wondering whether the fellow would recover. The young scholar had been startled by all that had occurred, and his ideas wandered back to the beginning of the evening, scarcely realising that a few hours ago he had not met Mrs. Goddard, had not experienced a surprising change in his feelings towards her, had not witnessed the strange scene under the trees. It seemed as though all these things had occupied a week at the very least, whereas

on that same afternoon he had been speculating upon his meeting with Mrs. Goddard, calling up her features to his mind as he had last seen them, framing speeches which when the meeting came he had not delivered, letting his mind run riot in the delicious anticipation of appearing before her in the light of a successful competitor for one of the greatest honours of English scholarship. And yet in a few hours all his feelings were changed, and to his infinite surprise, were changed without any suffering to himself; he knew well that, for some reason, Mrs. Goddard had lost the mysterious power of making him blush, and of sending strange thrills through his whole nature when he sat at her side; with some justice he attributed his new indifference to the extraordinary alteration in her appearance, whereby she seemed now so much older than himself, and he forthwith moralised upon the mutability of human affairs, with all the mental fluency of a very young man whose affairs are still extremely mutable. He fell to musing on the accident in the park, wondering how he would have acted in Mr. Juxon's place, wondering especially what object could have led the wretched tramp to attack the squire, wondering too at the very great anxiety shown by Mrs. Goddard.

As he sat by the bedside, the sick man suddenly moved and turning his eyes full upon John's face stared at him with a look of dazed surprise. He thrust out his wounded hand, bound up in a white handkerchief through which a little blood was slowly oozing, and to John's infinite surprise he spoke.

"Who are you?" he asked in a strange, mumbling voice, as though he had pebbles in his mouth.

John started forward in his chair and looked intently at Goddard's face.

"My name is Short," he answered mechanically. But the passing flash of intelligence was already gone, and Goddard's look became a glassy and idiotic stare. Still his lips moved. John came nearer and listened.

"Mary Goddard! Mary Goddard! Let me in!" said the sick man quite intelligibly, in spite of his uncertain tone. John uttered an exclamation of astonishment; his heart beat fast and he listened intently. The sick man mumbled inarticulate sounds; not another word could be distinguished. John looked for the bell, thinking that Mr. Juxon should be informed of the strange phenomenon at once; but before he could ring the squire himself entered the room, having finished and despatched his note to Mr. Ambrose.

"It is most extraordinary," said John. "He spoke just now—"

"What did he say?" asked Mr. Juxon very quickly.

"He said first, 'Who are you?' and then he said 'Mary Goddard, let me in!' Is it not most extraordinary? How in the world should he know about Mrs. Goddard?"

The squire turned a little pale and was silent for a moment. He had left John with the wounded man feeling sure that, for some time at least, the latter would not be likely to say anything intelligible.

"Most extraordinary!" he repeated presently. Then he looked at Goddard closely, and turned him again upon his back and put his injured hand beneath the sheet.

"Do you understand me? Do you know who I am?" he asked in a loud tone close to his ear.

But the unfortunate man gave no sign of intelligence, only his inarticulate mumbling grew louder though not more distinct. Mr. Juxon turned away impatiently.

"The fellow is in a delirium," he said. "I wish the doctor would come." He had hardly turned his back when the man spoke again.

"Mary Goddard!" he cried. "Let me in!"

"There!" said John. "The same words!"

Mr. Juxon shuddered, and looked curiously at his companion; then thrust his hands into his pockets and whistling softly walked about the room. John was shocked at what seemed in the squire a sort of indecent levity; he could not understand that his friend felt as though he should go mad.

Indeed the squire suffered intensely. The name of Mary Goddard, pronounced by the convict in his delirium brought home more vividly than anything could have done the relation between the wounded tramp and the woman the squire loved. It was positively true, then — there was not a shadow of doubt left, since this wretch lay there mumbling her name in his ravings! This was the husband of that gentle creature with sad pathetic eyes, so delicate, so refined that it seemed as though the coarser breath of the world of sin and shame could never come near her — this was her husband! It was horrible. This was the father of lovely Nellie, too. Was anything wanting to make the contrast more hideous?

Mr. Juxon felt that it was impossible to foresee what Walter Goddard might say in the course of another hour. He had often seen people in a delirium and knew how strangely that inarticulate murmuring sometimes breaks off into sudden incisive speech, as-

tonishing every one who hears. The man had already betrayed that he knew Mary Goddard; at the next interval in his ravings he might betray that she was his wife. John was still standing by the bedside, not having recovered from his astonishment; if John heard any more, he would be in possession of Mrs. Goddard's secret. The squire was an energetic man, equal to most emergencies; he suddenly made up his mind.

"Mr. Short," he said, "I will tell you something. You will see the propriety of being very discreet, in fact it is only to ensure your discretion that I wish to tell you this much. I have reason to believe that this fellow is a convict — do not be surprised — escaped from prison. He is a man who once — was in love with Mrs. Goddard, which accounts for his having found his way to Billingsfield. Yes — I know what you are going to say — Mrs. Goddard is aware of his presence, and that accounts for her excitement and her fainting. Do you understand?"

"But — good heavens!" exclaimed John in amazement. "Why did she not give information, if she knew he was in the neighbourhood?"

"That would be more than could be expected of any woman, Mr. Short. You forget that the man once loved her."

"And how did you — well, no. I won't ask any questions."

"No," said the squire, "please don't. You would be placing me in a disagreeable position. Not that I do not trust you implicitly, Mr. Short," he added frankly, "but I should be betraying a confidence. If this fellow dies here, he will be buried as an unknown tramp. I found no trace of a name upon his clothes. If he recovers, we will decide what course to pursue.

We will do our best for him — it is a delicate case of conscience. Possibly the poor fellow would very much prefer being allowed to die; but we cannot let him. Humanity, for some unexplained reason, forbids euthanasia and the use of the hemlock in such cases."

"Was he sentenced for a long time?" asked John, very much impressed by the gravity of the situation.

"Twelve years originally, I believe. Aggravated by his escape and by his assault on me, his term might very likely be extended to twenty years if he were taken again."

"That is to say, if he recovers?" inquired John.

"Precisely. I do not think I would hesitate to send him back to prison if he recovered."

"I do not wonder you think he would rather die here, if he were consulted," said John. "It would not be murder to let him die peacefully — "

"In the opinion of the law it might be called manslaughter, though I do not suppose anything would be said if I had simply placed him here and omitted to call in a physician. He cannot live very long in this state, unless something is done for him immediately. Look at him."

There was no apparent change in Goddard's condition. He lay upon his back staring straight upward and mumbling aloud with every breath he drew.

"He must have been ill, before he attacked me," continued Mr. Juxon, very much as though he were talking to himself. "He evidently is in a raging fever — brain fever I should think. That is probably the reason why he missed his aim — that and the darkness. If he had been well he would have killed me fast enough with that bludgeon. As you say, Mr.

Short, there is no doubt whatever that he would prefer to die here, if he had his choice. In my opinion, too, it would be far more merciful to him and to — to him in fact. Nevertheless, neither you nor I would like to remember that we had let him die without doing all we could to keep him alive. It is a very singular case."

"Most singular," echoed John.

"Besides — there is another thing. Suppose that he had attacked me as he did, but that I had killed him with my stick — or that Stamboul had made an end of him then and there. The law would have said it served him right — would it not? Of course. But if I had not quite killed him, or, as has actually happened, he survived the embraces of my dog, the law insists that I ought to do everything in my power to save the remnant of his life. What for? In order that the law may give itself the satisfaction of dealing with him according to its lights. I think the law is very greedy, I object to it, I think it is ridiculous from that point of view, but then, when I come to examine the thing I find that my own conscience tells me to save him, although I think it best that he should die. Therefore the law is not ridiculous. Pleasant dilemma — the impossible case! The law is at the same time ridiculous and not ridiculous. The question is, does the law deduce itself from conscience, or is conscience the direct result of existing law?"

The squire appeared to be in a strangely moralising mood, and John listened to him with some surprise. He could not understand that the good man was talking to persuade himself, and to concentrate his faculties, which had been almost unbalanced by the events of the evening.

"I think," said John with remarkable good sense, "that the instinct of man is to preserve life when he is calm. When a man is fighting with another he is hot and tries to kill his enemy; when the fight is over, the natural instinct returns."

"The only thing worth knowing in such cases is the precise point at which the fight may be said to be over. I once knew a young surgeon in India who thought he had killed a cobra and proceeded to extract the fangs in order to examine the poison. Unfortunately the snake was not quite dead; he bit the surgeon in the finger and the poor fellow died in thirty-five minutes."

"Dreadful!" said John. "But you do not think this poor fellow could do anything very dangerous now — do you?"

"Oh, dear me, no!" returned the squire. "I was only stating a case to prove that one is sometimes justified in going quite to the end of a fight. No indeed! He will not be dangerous for some time, if he ever is again. But, as I was saying, he must have been ill some time. Delirium never comes on in this way, so soon — "

Some one knocked at the door. It was Holmes, who came to say that the physician, Doctor Longstreet, had arrived.

"Oh — it is Doctor Longstreet is it?" said the squire. "Ask him to come up."

CHAPTER XXI.

Doctor Longstreet was not the freethinking physician of Billingsfield. The latter was out when Mr. Juxon's groom went in search of him, and the man had driven on to the town, six miles away. The doctor was an old man with a bright eye, a deeply furrowed forehead, a bald head and clean shaved face. He walked as though his frame were set together with springs and there was a curious snapping quickness in his speech. He seemed full of vitality and bore his years with a jaunty air of merriment which inspired confidence, for he seemed perpetually laughing at the ills of the flesh and ready to make other people laugh at them too. But his bright eyes had a penetrating look and though he judged quickly he generally was right in his opinion. He entered the room briskly, not knowing that the sick man was there.

"Now, Mr. Juxon," he said cheerfully, "I am with you." He had the habit of announcing his presence in this fashion, as though his brisk and active personality were likely to be overlooked. A moment later he caught sight of the bed. "Dear me," he added in a lower voice, "I did not know our patient was here."

He went to Walter Goddard's side, looked at him attentively, felt his pulse, and his forehead, glanced at the bandages the squire had roughly put upon his

throat and hand, drew up the sheet again beneath his chin and turned sharply round.

"Brain fever, sir," he said cheerfully. "Brain fever. You must get some ice and have some beef tea made as soon as possible. He is in a very bad way — curious, too; he looks like a cross between a ticket of leave man and a gentleman. Tramp, you say? That would not prevent his being either. You cannot disturb him — don't be afraid. He hears nothing — is off, the Lord knows where, raving delirious. Must look to his scratches though — dangerous — inflammation. Do you mind telling me what happened — how long he has been here?"

The squire in a few words informed Doctor Longstreet of the attack made upon him in the park. The doctor looked at his watch.

"Only two hours and a half since," he remarked. "It is just midnight now, very good — the man must have been in a fever all day — yesterday, too, perhaps. He is not badly hurt by the dog — like to see that dog, if you don't mind — the fright most likely sent him into delirium. You have nothing to accuse yourself of, Mr. Juxon: it was certainly not your fault. Even if the dog had not bitten him, he would most likely have been in his present state by this time. Would you mind sending for some ice at once? Thank you. It was very lucky for the fellow that he attacked you just when he did — secured him the chance of being well taken care of. If he had gone off like this in the park he would have been dead before morning."

The squire rang and sent for the ice the doctor demanded.

"Do you think he will live?" he asked nervously.

"I don't know," answered Doctor Longstreet, frankly. "Nobody can tell. He is very much exhausted — may live two or three days in this state and then die or go to sleep and get well — may die in the morning — often do — cannot say. With a great deal of care, I think he has a chance."

"I am very anxious to save him," said the squire, looking hard at the physician.

"Very good of you, I am sure," replied Doctor Longstreet, cheerfully. "It is not everybody who would take so much trouble for a tramp. Of course if he dies people will say your dog killed him; but I will sign a paper to the effect that it is not true. If he had left you and your dog alone, he would have been dead in the morning to an absolute certainty."

"How very extraordinary!" exclaimed the squire, suddenly realising that instead of causing the man's death Stamboul had perhaps saved his life.

"It was certainly very odd that he should have chosen the best moment for assaulting you," continued the doctor. "It is quite possible that even then he was under some delusion — took you for somebody else — some old enemy. People do queer things in a brain fever. By the bye has he said anything intelligible since he has been here?"

John Short who had been standing silently by the bedside during the whole interview looked up quickly at the squire, wondering how he would answer. But Mr. Juxon did not hesitate.

"Yes. Twice he repeated a woman's name. That is very natural, I suppose. Do you think he will have any lucid moments for some time?"

"May," said the doctor, "may. When he does it is likely to be at the turning point; he will either

die or be better very soon after. If it comes soon he may say something intelligible. If he is much more exhausted than he is now, he will understand you, but you will not understand him. Meningitis always brings a partial paralysis of the tongue, when the patient is exhausted. Most probably he will go on moaning and mumbling, as he does now, for another day. You will be able to tell by his eye whether he understands anything; perhaps he will make some sign with his head or hand. Ah — here is the ice."

Doctor Longstreet went about his operations in a rapid and business like fashion and John gave what assistance he could. The squire stood leaning against the chimney-piece in deep thought.

Indeed he had enough to think of, when he had fully weighed the meaning of the doctor's words. He was surprised beyond measure at the turn things had taken; for although, as he had previously told John, he suspected that Goddard must have been in a fever for several hours before the assault, it had not struck him that Stamboul's attack had been absolutely harmless, still less that it might prove to have been the means of saving the convict's life. It was terribly hard to say that he desired to save the man, and yet the honest man in his heart prayed that he might really hope for that result. It would be far worse, should Goddard die, to remember that he had wished for his death. But it would be hard to imagine a more unexpected position than that in which the squire found himself; by a perfectly natural chain of circumstances he was now tending with the utmost care the man who had tried to murder him, and who of all men in the world, stood most in the way of the accomplishment of his desires.

He could not hide from himself the fact that he hated the sick man, even though he hoped, or tried to hope for his recovery. He hated him for the shame and suffering he had brought upon Mary Goddard in the first instance, for the terrible anxiety he had caused her by his escape and sudden appearance at her house; he hated him for being what he was, being also the father of Nellie, and he hated him honestly for his base attempt upon himself that night. He had good cause to hate him, and perhaps he was not ashamed of his hatred. To be called upon, however, to return good for such an accumulated mass of evil was almost too much for his human nature. It was but a faint satisfaction to think that if he recovered he was to be sent back to prison. Mr. Juxon did not know that there was blood upon the man's hands — he had yet to learn that; he would not deign to mention the assault in the park when he handed him over to the authorities; the man should simply go back to Portland to suffer the term of his imprisonment, as soon as he should be well enough to be moved — if that time ever came. If he died, he should be buried decently in a nameless grave, "six feet by four, by two," as Thomas Reid would have said — if he died.

Meanwhile, however, there was yet another consideration which disturbed the squire's meditations. Mrs. Goddard had a right to know that her husband was dying and, if she so pleased, she had a right to be at his bedside. But at the same time it would be necessary so to account for her presence as not to arouse Doctor Longstreet's suspicions, nor the comments of Holmes, the butler, and of his brigade in the servants' hall. It was no easy matter to do this

unless Mrs. Goddard were accompanied by the vicar's wife, the excellent and maternally minded Mrs. Ambrose. To accomplish this it would be necessary to ask the latter lady to spend a great part of her time at the Hall in taking care of the wretched Goddard, who would again be the gainer. But Mrs. Ambrose was as yet ignorant of the fact that he had escaped from prison; she must be told then, and an effort must be made to elicit her sympathy. Perhaps she and the vicar would come and stop a few days, thought the squire. Mrs. Goddard might then come and go as she pleased. Her presence by her husband's bedside would then be accounted for on the ground of her charitable disposition.

While Mr. Juxon was revolving these things in his mind he watched the doctor and John who were doing what was necessary for the sick man. Goddard moaned helplessly with every breath, in a loud, monotonous tone, very wearing to the nerves of those who heard it.

"There is little to be done," said Doctor Longstreet at last. "He must be fed — alternately a little beef tea and then a little weak brandy and water. We must try and keep the system up. That is his only chance. I will prescribe something and send it back by the groom."

"You are not going to leave us to-night?" exclaimed the squire in alarm.

"Must. Very sorry. Bad case of diphtheria in town — probably die before morning, unless I get there in time — I would not have come here for any one else. I will certainly be here before ten — he will live till then, I fancy, and I don't believe there will be any change in his condition. Good-night,

Mr. Juxon — beef tea and brandy every quarter of an hour. Good-night, Mr. —" he turned to John.

"Short," said John. "Good-night, doctor."

"Ah — I remember — used to be with Mr. Ambrose — yes. Delighted to meet you again, Mr. Short — good-night."

The doctor vanished, before either the squire or John had time to follow him. His departure left an unpleasant sense of renewed responsibility in the squire's mind.

"You had better go to bed, Mr. Short," he said kindly. "I will sit up with him."

But John would not hear of any such arrangement; he insisted upon bearing his share of the watching and stoutly refused to leave the squire alone. There was a large dressing-room attached to the room where Goddard was lying; the squire and John finally agreed to watch turn and turn about, one remaining with Goddard, while the other rested upon the couch in the dressing-room aforesaid. The squire insisted upon taking his watch first, and John lay down. It was past midnight and he was very tired, but it seemed impossible to sleep with the sound of that loud, monotonous mumbling perpetually in his ears. It was a horrible night, and John Short never forgot it so long as he lived. Years afterwards he could not enter the room where Goddard had lain without fancying he heard that perpetual groaning still ringing in his ears. For many hours it continued unabated and unchanging, never dying away to silence nor developing to articulate words. From time to time John could hear the squire's step as he moved about, administering the nourishment prescribed. If he had had the slightest idea of Mr. Juxon's state of

mind he would hardly have left him even to rest awhile in the next room.

Fortunately the squire's nerves were solid. A firm constitution hardened by thirty years of seafaring and by the consistent and temperate regularity which was part of his character, had so toughened his natural strength as to put him almost beyond the reach of mortal ills; otherwise he must have broken down under the mental strain thus forced upon him. It is no light thing to do faithfully the utmost to save a man one has good reason to hate, and whose death would be an undoubted blessing to every one who has anything to do with him. Walter Goddard was to Charles Juxon at once an enemy, an obstacle and a rival; an enemy, for having attempted his life, an obstacle, because while he lived he prevented the squire from marrying Mrs. Goddard and a rival because she had once loved him and for the sake of that love was still willing to sacrifice much for him. And yet the very fact that she had loved him made it easier to be kind to him; it seemed to the squire that, after all, in taking care of Goddard he was in some measure serving her, too, seeing that she would have done the same thing herself could she have been present.

Yet there was something very generous and large-hearted in the way Charles Juxon did his duty by the sick man. There are people who seem by nature designed to act heroic parts in life, whose actions habitually take an heroic form, and whose whole character is of another stamp from that of average humanity. Of such people much is expected, because they seem to offer much; no one is surprised to hear of their making great sacrifices, no one is astonished if

they exhibit great personal courage in times of danger. Very often they are people of large vanity, whose chiefest vanity is not to seem vain; gifted with great powers and always seeking opportunities of using them, holding high ideas upon most subjects but rarely conceiving themselves incapable of attaining to any ideal they select for their admiration; brave in combat partly from real courage, partly, as I have often heard officers say of a dandy soldier in the ranks, because they are too proud to run away; but, on the whole, heroic by temperament and in virtue of a singular compound of pride, strength and virtue, often accomplishing really great things. They are almost always what are called striking people, for their pride and their strength generally attract attention by their magnitude, and something in their mere appearance distinguishes them from the average mass.

But Charles Juxon did not in any way belong to this type, any more than the other persons who found themselves concerned in the events which culminated in Goddard's illness. He was a very simple man whose pride was wholly unconscious, who did not believe himself destined to do anything remarkable, who regarded his own personality as rather uninteresting and who, had he been asked about himself, would have been the first to disclaim any sentiments of the heroic kind. With very little imagination, he possessed great stability himself and great belief in the stability of things in general, a character of the traditional kind known as "northern," though it would be much more just to describe it as the "temperate" or "central" type of man. Wherever there is exaggeration in nature, there is exaggerated imag-

ination in man. The solid and unimaginative part of the English character is undeniably derived from the Angles or from the Flemish; it is morally the best part, but it is by all odds the least interesting — it is found in the type of man belonging to the plains in a temperate zone, who differs in every respect from the real northman, his distant cousin and hereditary enemy. If Charles Juxon was remarkable for anything it was for his modesty and reticence, in a word, for his apparent determination not to be remarkable at all.

And now, in the extremest anxiety and difficulty, his character served him well; for he unconsciously refused to allow to himself that his position was extraordinary or his responsibility greater than he was able to bear. He disliked intensely the idea of being put forward or thrust into a dramatic situation, and he consequently failed signally to fulfil the dramatic necessities. There was not even a struggle in his heart between the opposite possibilities of letting Goddard die, by merely relaxing his attention, and of redoubling his care and bringing about his recovery. He never once asked himself, after the chances of the patient surviving the fever were stated, whether he would not be justified in sending for some honest housewife from the village to take care of the tramp instead of looking to his wants himself. He simply did his best to save the man's life, without hesitation, without suspecting that he was doing anything extraordinary, doing, as he had always done, the best thing that came in his way according to the best of his ability. He could not wholly suppress the reflection that much good might ensue from Goddard's death, but the thought never for a moment interfered with his efforts to save the convict alive.

But John lay in the next room, kept awake by the sick man's perpetual groaning and by the train of thought which ran through his brain. There were indeed more strange things than his philosophy could account for, but the strangest of all was that the squire should know who the tramp was; he must know it, John thought, since he knew all about him, his former love for Mrs. Goddard and his recent presence in the neighbourhood. The young man's curiosity was roused to its highest pitch and he longed to know more. He at once guessed that there must have been much intimate confidence between Mr. Juxon and Mrs. Goddard; he suspected moreover that there must be some strange story connected with her, something which accounted for the peculiar stamp of a formerly luxurious life which still clung to her, and which should explain her residence in Billingsfield. But John was very far from suspecting the real truth.

His mind was restless and the inaction became intolerable to him. He rose at last and went again into the room where his friend was watching. Mr. Juxon sat by the bedside, the very picture of patience, one leg crossed over the other and his hands folded together upon his knee, his face paler than usual but perfectly calm, his head bent a little to one side and his smooth hair, which had been slightly ruffled in the encounter in the park, as smooth as ever. It was a very distinctive feature of him; it was part of the sleek and spotless neatness which Mrs. Ambrose so much admired.

"It is my turn, now," said John. "Will you lie down for a couple of hours?"

The squire rose. Being older and less excitable than John, he was beginning to feel the need of rest.

People who have watched often by the sick know how terribly long are those hours of the night between three o'clock and dawn; long always, but seeming interminable when one is obliged to listen perpetually to a long-drawn, inarticulate moaning, a constant effort to speak which never results in words.

"You are very good," said Mr. Juxon, quietly. "If you will give him the things from time to time, I will take a nap."

With that he went and lay down upon the couch, and in three minutes was as sound asleep as though he were in bed. John sat by the sick man and looked at his flushed features and listened to the hard-drawn breath followed each time by that terrible, monotonous, mumbling groan.

It might have been three-quarters of an hour since the squire had gone to sleep when John thought he saw a change in Goddard's face; it seemed to him that the flush subsided from his forehead, very slowly, leaving only a bright burning colour in his cheeks. His eyes seemed suddenly to grow clearer and a strange look of intelligence came into them; his whole appearance was as though illuminated by a flash of some light different from that of the candles which burned upon the table. John rose to his feet and came and looked at him. The groaning suddenly ceased and Goddard's eyelids, which had been motionless for hours, moved naturally. He appeared to be observing John's face attentively.

"Where is the squire?" he asked quite naturally — so naturally that John was startled.

"Asleep in the next room," replied the latter.

"I did not kill him after all," said Goddard, turning himself a little as though to be more at his ease.

"No," answered John. "He is not hurt at all. Can you tell me who you are?" For his life, he could not help asking the question. It seemed so easy to find out who the fellow was, now that he could speak intelligibly. But Goddard's face contracted suddenly, in a hideous smile.

"Don't you wish you knew?" he said roughly. "But I know you, my boy, I know you — ha! ha! There's no getting away from you, my boy, is there?"

"Who am I?" asked John in astonishment.

"You are the hangman," said Goddard. "I know you very well. The hangman is always so well dressed. I say, old chap, turn us off quick, you know — no fumbling about the bolt. Look here — I like your face," he lowered his voice — "there are nearly sixty pounds in my right-hand trouser pocket — there are — Mary — ah — gave — M — a —"

Again his eyes fixed themselves and the moaning began and continued. John was horror-struck and stood for a moment gazing at his face, over which the deep flush had spread once more, seeming to obliterate all appearance of intelligence. Then the young man put his hand beneath Goddard's head and gently replaced him in his former position, smoothing the pillows, and giving him a little brandy. He debated whether or not he should call the squire from his rest to tell him what had happened, but seeing that Goddard had now returned to his former state, he supposed such moments of clear speech were to be expected from time to time. He sat down again, and waited; then after a time he went to the window and looked anxiously for the dawn. It seemed an intolerably long night.

But the day came at last and shed a ghastly grey

tinge upon the sick-room, revealing as it were the outlines of all that was bad to look at, which the warm yellow candle-light had softened with a kindlier touch. John accidentally looked at himself in the mirror as he passed and was startled at his own pale face; but the convict, labouring in the ravings of his fever, seemed unconscious of the dawning day; he was not yet exhausted and his harsh voice never ceased its jarring gibber. John wondered whether he should ever spend such a night again, and shuddered at the recollection of each moment.

The daylight waked the squire from his slumbers, however, and before the sun was up he came out of the dressing-room, looking almost as fresh as though nothing had happened to him in the night. Accustomed for years to rise at all hours, in all weathers, unimpressionable, calm and strong, he seemed superior to the course of events.

"Well, Mr. Short, you allowed me a long nap. You must be quite worn out, I should think. How is the patient?"

John told what had occurred.

"Took you for the hangman, did he?" said the squire. "I wonder why — but you say he asked after me very sensibly?"

"Quite so. It was when I asked him his own name, that he began raving again," answered John innocently.

"What made you ask him that?" asked Mr. Juxon, who did not seem pleased.

"Curiosity," was John's laconic answer.

"Yes — but I fancy it frightened him. If I were you I would not do it again, if he has a lucid moment. I imagine it was fright that made him delirious in the first instance."

"All right," quoth John. "I won't." But he made his own deductions. The squire evidently knew who he was, and did not want John to know, for some unexplained reason. The young man wondered what the reason could be; the mere name of the wretched man was not likely to convey any idea to his mind, for it was highly improbable that he had ever met him before his conviction. So John departed to his own room and refreshed himself with a tub, while the squire kept watch by daylight.

It was not yet eight o'clock when Holmes brought a note from the vicar, which Mr. Juxon tore open and read with anxious interest.

"My dear Mr. Juxon — I received your note late last night, but I judged it better to answer this morning, not wishing to excite suspicion by sending to you at so late an hour. The intelligence is indeed alarming and you will, I daresay, understand me, when I tell you that I found it necessary to communicate it to Mrs. Ambrose — "

The squire could not refrain from smiling at the vicar's way of putting the point; but he read quickly on.

"She however — and I confess my surprise and gratification — desires to accompany me to the Hall this morning, volunteering to take all possible care of the unfortunate man. As she has had much experience in visiting the sick, I fancy that she will render us very valuable assistance in saving his life. Pray let me know if the plan has your approval, as it may be dangerous to lose time. — Yours sincerely,

"Augustin Ambrose."

Mr. Juxon was delighted to find that the difficult task of putting Mrs. Ambrose in possession of the facts of the case had been accomplished in the ordinary, the very ordinary, course of events by her own determination to find out what was to be known. In an hour she might be at Goddard's bedside, and Mrs. Goddard would be free to see her husband. He despatched a note at once and redoubled his attentions to the sick man whose condition, however, showed no signs of changing.

CHAPTER XXII.

Mrs. Ambrose kept her word and arrived with the vicar before nine o'clock, protesting her determination to take care of poor Goddard, so long as he needed any care. Mr. Juxon warned her that John did not know who the man was, and entreated her to be careful of her speech when John was present. There was no reason why John should ever know anything more about it, he said; three could keep a secret, but no one knew whether four could be as discreet.

The squire took Mrs. Ambrose and her husband to Goddard's room and telling her that Doctor Longstreet was expected in an hour, by which time he himself hoped to have returned, he left the two good people in charge of the sick man and went to see Mrs. Goddard. He sent John a message to the effect that all was well and that he should take some rest while the Ambroses relieved the watch, and having thus disposed his household he went out, bound upon one of the most disagreeable errands he had ever undertaken. But he set his teeth and walked boldly down the park.

At the turn of the avenue he paused, at the spot where Goddard had attacked him. There was nothing to be seen at first, for the road was hard and dry and there was no trace of the scuffle; but as the squire looked about he spied his hat, lying in the

ditch, and picked it up. It was heavy with the morning dew and the brim was broken and bent where Goddard's weapon had struck it. Hard by in a heap of driven oak leaves lay the weapon itself, which Mr. Juxon examined curiously. It was a heavy piece of hewn oak, evidently very old, and at one end a thick iron spike was driven through, the sharp point projecting upon one side and the wrought head upon the other. He turned it over in his hands and realised that he had narrowly escaped his death. Then he laid the hat and the club together and threw a handful of leaves over them, intending to take them to the Hall at a later hour, and he turned to go upon his way towards the cottage. But as he turned he saw two men coming towards him, and now not twenty yards away. His heart sank, for one of the two was Thomas Gall the village constable; the other was a quiet-looking individual with grey whiskers, plainly dressed and unassuming in appearance. Instinctively the squire knew that Gall's companion must be a detective. He was startled, and taken altogether unawares; but the men were close upon him and there was nothing to be done but to face them boldly.

Gall made his usual half military salute as he came up, and the man in plain clothes raised his hat politely.

"The gentleman from Lunnon, sir," said Gall by way of introduction, assuming an air of mysterious importance.

"Yes?" said Mr. Juxon interrogatively. "Do you wish to speak to me?"

"The gentleman's come on business, sir. In point of fact, sir, it's the case we was speakin' of lately."

The squire knew very well what was the matter. Indeed, he had wondered that the detective had not arrived sooner. That did not make it any easier to receive him, however; on the contrary, if he had come on the previous day matters would have been much simpler.

"Very well, Gall," answered Mr. Juxon. "I am much obliged to you for bringing Mr. —" he paused and looked at the man in plain clothes.

"Booley, sir," said the detective.

"Thank you — yes — for bringing Mr. Booley so far. You may go home, Gall. If we need your services we will send to your house."

"It struck me, sir," remarked Gall with a bland smile, "as perhaps I might be of use — prefeshnal in fact, sir."

"I will send for you," said the detective, shortly. The manners of the rural constabulary had long ceased to amuse him.

Gall departed rather reluctantly, but to make up for being left out of the confidential interview which was to follow, he passed his thumb round his belt and thrust out his portly chest as he marched down the avenue. He subsequently spoke very roughly to a little boy who was driving an old sheep to the butcher's at the other end of the village.

Mr. Juxon and the detective turned back and walked slowly towards the Hall.

"Will you be good enough to state exactly what the business is," said the squire, well knowing that it was best to go straight to the point.

"You are Mr. Juxon, I believe?" inquired Mr. Booley looking at his companion sharply. The squire nodded. "Very good, Mr. Juxon," continued the

official. "I am after a man called Walter Goddard. Do you know anything about him? His wife, Mrs. Mary Goddard, lives in this village."

"Walter Goddard is at this moment in my house," said the squire calmly. "I know all about him. He lay in wait for me at this very spot last night and attacked me. My dog pulled him down."

The detective was somewhat surprised at the intelligence, and at the cool manner in which his companion conveyed it.

"I am very glad to hear that. In that case I will take him at once."

"I fear that is impossible," answered the squire. "The man is raving in the delirium of a brain fever. Meanwhile I shall be glad if you will stay in the house, until he is well enough to be moved. The doctor will be here at ten o'clock, and he will give you the details of the case better than I can. It would be quite impossible to take him away at present."

"May I ask," inquired Mr. Booley severely, "why you did not inform the local police?"

"Because it would have been useless. If he had escaped after attacking me, I should have done so. But since I caught him, and found him to be very ill — utterly unable to move, I proposed to take charge of him myself. Mrs. Goddard is a friend of mine, and of the vicar, who knows her story perfectly well. To publish the story in the village would be to do her a great injury. Mrs. Ambrose, the vicar's wife, who is also acquainted with the circumstances, is at this moment taking care of the sick man. I presume that my promise — I am a retired officer of the Navy — and the promise of Mr. Ambrose. the vicar, are sufficient guarantee —"

"Oh, there is no question of guarantee," said Mr. Booley. "I assure you, Mr. Juxon, I have no doubt whatever that you have acted for the best. Can you tell me how long Goddard has been in the neighbourhood?"

The squire told the detective what he knew, taking care not to implicate Mrs. Goddard, even adding with considerable boldness, for he was not positively certain of the statement, that neither she nor any one else had known where the man was hiding. Mr. Booley being sure that Goddard could not escape him, saw that he could claim the reward offered for the capture of the convict. He asked whether he might see him.

"That is doubtful," said the squire. "When I left him just now he was quite unconscious, but he has lucid moments. To frighten him at such a time might kill him outright."

"It is very easy for me to say that I am another medical man," remarked Mr. Booley. "Perhaps I might say it in any case, just to keep the servants quiet. I would like to see Mrs. Goddard, too."

"That is another matter. She is very nervous. I am going to her house, now, and probably she will come back to the Hall with me. I might perhaps tell her that you are here, but I think it would be likely to shock her very much."

"Well, well, we will see about it," answered Mr. Booley. They reached the house and the squire ushered the detective into the study, begging him to wait for his return.

It was a new complication, though it had seemed possible enough. But the position was not pleasant. To feel that there was a detective in the house wait-

ing to carry off Goddard, so soon as he should be well enough to be moved, was about as disagreeable as anything well could be. The longer the squire thought of it, the more impossible and at the same time unnecessary it seemed to be to inform Mrs. Goddard of Booley's arrival. He hastened down the park, feeling that no time must be lost in bringing her to her husband's bedside.

He found her waiting for him, and was struck by the calmness she displayed. To tell the truth the violence of her emotions had been wholly expended on the previous night and the reaction had brought an intense melancholy quiet, which almost frightened Mr. Juxon. The habit of bearing great anxiety had not been wholly forgotten, for the lesson had been well learned during those terrible days of her husband's trial, and it was as though his sudden return had revived in her the custom of silent suffering. She hardly spoke, but listened quietly to Mr. Juxon's account of what had happened.

"You are not hurt?" she asked, almost incredulously. Her eyes rested on her friend's face with a wistful look.

"No, I assure you, not in the least," he said. "But your poor husband is very ill — very ill indeed."

"Tell me," said she quietly, "is he dead? Are you trying to break it to me?"

"No — no indeed. He is alive — he may even recover. But that is very uncertain. It might be best to wait until the doctor has been again. I will come back and fetch you — "

"Oh, no, I will go at once. I would like to walk. It will do me good."

So the two set out without further words upon their errand. Mr. Juxon had purposely omitted to speak of Mr. Booley's arrival. It would be easy, he thought, to prevent them from meeting in the great house.

"Do you know," said Mary Goddard, as they walked together, "it is very hard to wish that he may recover — " she stopped short.

"Very hard," answered the squire. "His life must be one of misery, if he lives."

"Of course you would send him back?" she asked nervously.

"My dear friend, there is no other course open to me. Your own safety requires it."

"God knows — you would only be doing right," she said and was silent again. She knew, though the squire did not, what fate awaited Walter Goddard if he were given up to justice. She knew that he had taken life and must pay the penalty. Yet she was very calm; her senses were all dulled and yet her thoughts seemed to be consecutive and rational. She realised fully that the case of life and death was ill balanced; death had it which ever course events might take, and she could not save her husband. She thought of it calmly and calmly hoped that he might die now, in his bed, with her by his side. It was a better fate.

"You say that the doctor thinks he must have been ill some time?" she asked after a time.

"Yes — he was quite sure of it," answered the squire.

"Perhaps that was why he spoke so roughly to me," she said in a low voice, as though speaking to herself.

The tears came into the squire's eyes for sheer pity. Even in this utmost extremity the unhappy woman tried to account for her husband's rude and cruel speech. Mr. Juxon did not answer but looked away. They passed the spot where the scuffle had occurred on the previous night, but still he said nothing, fearing to disturb her by making his story seem too vividly real.

"Where is he?" she asked as they reached the Hall, looking up at the windows.

"On the other side."

They went in and mounted the stairs towards the sick man's chamber. Mr. Juxon went in, leaving Mrs. Goddard outside for a moment. She could hear that hideous rattling monotonous moan, and she trembled from head to foot. Presently Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose came out, looking very grave and passed by her with a look of sympathy.

"Will you come in?" said the squire in a low voice.

Mrs. Goddard entered the room quickly. On seeing her husband, she uttered a low cry and laid her hand upon Mr. Juxon's arm. For some seconds she stood thus, quite motionless, gazing with intense and sympathetic interest at the sick man's face. Then she went to his side and laid her hand upon his burning forehead and looked into his eyes.

"Walter! Walter!" she cried. "Don't you know me? Oh, why does he groan like that? Is he suffering?" she asked turning to Mr. Juxon.

"No — I do not think he suffers much. He is quite unconscious. He is talking all the time but cannot pronounce the words."

The squire stood at a distance looking on, noting

the womanly thoughtfulness Mrs. Goddard displayed as she smoothed her husband's pillow and tried to settle his head more comfortably upon the bags of ice; and all the while she never took her eyes from Goddard's face, as though she were fascinated by her own sorrow and his suffering. She moved about the bed with that instinctive understanding of sickness which belongs to delicate women, but her glance never strayed to Mr. Juxon; she seemed forced by a mysterious magnetism to look at Walter and only at him.

"Has he been long like this?" she asked.

"Ever since last night. He called you once — he said, 'Mary Goddard, let me in!' And then he said something else — he said — I cannot remember what he said." Mr. Juxon checked himself, remembering the words John had heard, and of which he only half understood the import. But Mrs. Goddard hardly noticed his reply.

"Will you leave me alone with him?" she said presently. "There is a bell in the room — I could ring if anything — happened," she added with mournful hesitation.

"Certainly," answered the squire. "Only, I beg of you my dear friend — do not distress yourself needlessly — "

"Needlessly!" she repeated with a sorrowful smile. "It is all I can do for him — to watch by his side. He will not live — he will not live, I am sure."

The squire inwardly prayed that she might be right, and left her alone with the sick man. Who, he thought, was better fitted, who had a stronger right to be at his bedside at such a time? If only

he might die! For if he lived, how much more terrible would the separation be, when Booley the detective came to conduct him back to his prison! In truth, it would be more terrible even than Mr. Juxon imagined.

Meanwhile he must go and see to the rest of the household. He must speak to John Short; he must see Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose, and he must take precautions against any of them seeing Mr. Booley. This was, he thought, very important, and he resolved to speak with the latter first. John was probably asleep, worn out with the watching of the night.

Mr. Booley sat in the squire's study where he had been left almost an hour earlier. He had installed himself in a comfortable corner by the fire and was reading the morning paper which he had found unopened upon the table. He seemed thoroughly at home as he sat there, a pair of glasses upon his nose and his feet stretched out towards the flame upon the hearth.

"Thank you, I am doing very well, Mr. Juxon," he said as the squire entered.

"Oh — I am very glad," answered Mr. Juxon politely. The information was wholly voluntary as he had not asked any question concerning the detective's comfort.

"And how is the patient?" inquired Mr. Booley. "Do you think there is any chance of removing him this afternoon?"

"This afternoon?" repeated the squire, in some astonishment. "The man is very ill. It may be weeks before he can be removed."

"Oh!" ejaculated the other. "I was not aware of that. I cannot possibly stay so long. To-morrow, at the latest, he will have to go."

"But, my dear sir," argued Mr. Juxon, "the thing is quite impossible. The doctor can testify to that — "

"We are apt to be our own doctors in these cases," said Mr. Booley, calmly. "At all events he can be taken as far as the county gaol."

"Upon my word, it would be murder to think of it — a man in a brain fever, in a delirium, to be taken over jolting roads — dear me! It is not to be thought of!"

Mr. Booley smiled benignly, for the first time since the squire had made his acquaintance.

"You seem to forget, Mr. Juxon, that my time is very valuable," he observed.

"Yes — no doubt — but the man's life, Mr. Booley, is valuable too."

"Hardly, I should say," returned the detective coolly. "But since you are so very pressing, I will ask to see the man at once. I can soon tell you whether he will die on the road or not. I have had considerable experience in that line."

"You shall see him, as soon as the doctor comes," replied the squire, shocked at the man's indifference and hardness.

"It certainly cannot hurt him to see me, if he is still unconscious or raving," objected Mr. Booley.

"He might have a lucid moment just when you are there — the fright would very likely kill him."

"That would decide the question of moving him," answered Booley, taking his glasses from his nose, laying down the paper and rising to his feet. "There is clearly some reason why you object to my seeing him now. I would not like to insist, Mr. Juxon, but you must please remember that it may be my duty to do so."

The squire was beginning to be angry; even his calm temper was not proof against the annoyance caused by Mr. Booley's appearance at the Hall, but he wisely controlled himself and resorted to other means of persuasion.

"There is a reason, Mr. Booley; indeed there are several very good reasons. One of them is that it might be fatal to frighten the man; another is that at this moment his wife is by his bedside. She has entirely made up her mind that when he is recovered he must return to prison, but at present it would be most unkind to let her know that you are in the house. The shock to her nerves would be terrible."

"Oh," said Mr. Booley, "if there is a lady in the case we must make some allowances, I presume. Only, put yourself in my place, Mr. Juxon, put yourself in my place."

The squire doubted whether he would be willing to exchange his personality for that of Mr. Booley.

"Well — what then?" he said. "I think I would try to be merciful."

"Yes; but suppose that in being merciful, you just allowed that lady the time necessary to present her beloved husband with a convenient little pill, just to shorten his sufferings? And suppose that — "

"Really, Mr. Booley, I think you make very unwarrantable suppositions," said Mr. Juxon severely. "I cannot suppose any such thing."

"Many women — ladies too — have done that to save a man from hanging," returned Mr. Booley, fixing his grey eye on the squire.

"Hanging?" repeated the latter in surprise. "But Goddard is not to be hanged."

"Of course he is. What did you expect?" Mr. Booley looked surprised in his turn.

"But — what for?" asked the squire very anxiously. "He has not killed anybody — "

"Oh — then you don't know how he escaped?"

"No — I have not the least idea — pray tell me."

"I don't wonder you don't understand me, then," said Mr. Booley. "Well, it is a short tale but a lively one, as they say. Of course it stands to reason in the first place that he could not have got out of Portland. He was taken out for a purpose. You know that after his trial was over, all sorts of other things besides the forgery came out about him, proving that he was altogether a very bad lot. Now about three weeks ago there was a question of identifying a certain person — it was a very long story, with a bad murder case and all the rest of it — commonplace, you know the sort — never mind the story, it will all be in the papers before long when they have got it straight, which is more than I have, seeing that these affairs do get a little complicated occasionally, you know, as such things will." Mr. Booley paused. It was evident that his command of the English tongue was not equal to the strain of constructing a long sentence.

"This person, whom he was to identify, was the person murdered?" inquired Mr. Juxon.

"Exactly. It was not the person, but the person's body, so to say. Somebody who had been connected with the Goddard case was sure that if Goddard could be got out of prison he could do the identifying all straight. It did not matter about his being under sentence of hard labour — it was a private case, and the officer only wanted Goddard's

opinion for his personal satisfaction. So he goes to the governor of Portland, and finds that Goddard had a very good character in that institution — he was a little bit of a gay deceiver, you see, and knew how to fetch the chaps in there and particularly the parson. So he had a good character. Very good. The governor consents to send him to town for this private job, under a strong force — that means three policemen — with irons on his hands. When they reached London they put him in a fourwheeler. Those things are done sometimes, and nobody is the wiser, because the governor does it on his own responsibility, for the good of the law, I suppose. I never approved of it. Do you follow me, Mr. Juxon?"

"Perfectly," answered the squire. "He was driven from the station with three policemen in a hackney-coach, you say."

"Exactly so. It was a queer place where the body was — away down in the Minories. Ever been there, Mr. Juxon? Queer place it is, and no mistake. I would like to show you some little bits of London. Well, as I was saying, the fourwheeler went along, with two policemen inside with Goddard and one on the box. Safe, you would say. Not a bit of it. Just the beggar's luck, too. It was dusk. That is always darker than when the lamps are well going. The fourwheeler ran into a dray-cart, round a corner where they were repairing the street. The horse went down with a smash, shafts, lamp, everything broken to smithereens, as they say. The policeman jumps off the box with the cabby to see what is the matter. One of the bobbies — the policemen I would say — it's a technical term, Mr. Juxon — gets out of the cab to see what's up, leaving God-

dard in charge of the other. Then there is a terrific row; more carts come up, more fourwheelers — everybody swearing at once. Presently the policeman who had got out comes back and looks in to see if everything is straight. Not a bit of it again. Other door of the cab was open and — no Goddard. But the policeman was lying back in the corner and when they struck a light and looked, they found he was stone dead. Goddard had brained him with the irons on his wrists. No one ever saw him from that day to this. He must have known London well — they say he did, and he was a noted quick runner. Being nightfall and rather foggy as it generally is in those parts he got clear off. But he killed the man who had him in charge and if he lives he will have to swing for it. May be Mrs. Goddard does not know that — may be she does. That is the reason I don't want her to be left alone with him. No doubt she is very good and all that, but she might just take it into her head to save the government twenty feet of rope."

"I am very much surprised, and very much shocked," said the squire gravely. "I had no idea of this. But I will answer for Mrs. Goddard. Why was all this never in the papers — or was there an account of it, Mr. Booley?"

"Oh no — it was never mentioned. We felt sure that we should catch him and until we did we — I mean the profession — thought it just as well to say nothing. The governor remembered to have read a letter from Goddard's wife, just telling him where she was living, about two years ago. Being harmless, he passed it and never copied the address; then he could not remember it. At last they found it in

his cell, hidden away somehow. The beggar had kept it."

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed Mr. Juxon. In the silence which followed, the sound of wheels was heard outside. Doctor Longstreet had arrived.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHILE Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose were together in the library downstairs, while John Short was waking from the short sleep he had enjoyed, and while the squire was listening in the study to Mr. Booley's graphic account of the convict's escape, Mrs. Goddard was alone with her husband, watching every movement and listening intently to every moaning breath he drew.

In the desperate anxiety for his fate, she forgot herself and seemed no longer to feel fatigue or exhaustion from all she herself had suffered. She stood long by his bedside, hoping that he might recognise her and yet fearing the moment when he should recover his senses. Then she noticed that the morning sun was pouring in through the window and she drew a curtain across, to shade his eyes from the glare. Whether the sudden changing of the light affected Goddard, as it does sometimes affect persons in the delirium of a brain fever, or whether it was only a natural turn in his condition, she never knew. His expression changed and acquired that same look of strange intelligence which John Short had noticed in the night; the flush sank from his forehead and gave place to a luminous, transparent colour, his eyelids once more moved naturally, and he looked at his wife as she stood beside him, and recognised her. He was weaker now than when he

had spoken with John Short six hours earlier, but he was more fully in possession of his faculties for a brief moment. Mary Goddard trembled and felt her hands turn cold with excitement.

"Walter, do you know me now?" she asked very softly.

"Yes," he said faintly, and closed his eyes. She laid her hand upon his forehead; the coldness of it seemed pleasant to him, for a slight smile flickered over his face.

"You are better, I think," she said again, gazing intently at him.

"Mary — it is Mary?" he murmured, slowly opening his eyes and looking up to her. "Yes — I know you — I have been dreaming a long time. I'm so tired — "

"You must not talk," said she. "It will tire you more." Then she gave him some drink. "Try and sleep," she said in a soothing tone.

"I cannot — oh, Mary, I am very ill."

"But you will get well again — "

Goddard started suddenly, and laid his hand upon her arm with more force than she suspected he possessed.

"Where am I?" he asked, staring about the room. "Is this your house, Mary? What became of Juxon?"

"He is not hurt. He brought you home in his arms, Walter, to his own house, and is taking care of you."

"Good heavens! He will give me up. No, no, don't hold me — I must be off!"

He made a sudden effort to rise, but he was very weak. He fell back exhausted upon his pillow; his

fingers gripped the sheet convulsively, and his face grew paler.

"Caught — like a rat!" he muttered. Mary Goddard sighed.

Was she to give him hope of escape? Or should she try to calm him now, and when he was better, break the truth to him? Was she to make him believe that he was safe for the present, and hold out a prospect of escape when he should be better, or should she tell him now, once for all, while he was in his senses, that he was lost? It was a terrible position. Love she had none left for him, but there was infinite pity still in her heart and there would be while he breathed. She hesitated one moment only, and it may be that she decided for the wrong; but it was her pity that moved her, and not any remnant of love.

"Hush, Walter," she said. "You may yet escape, when you are strong enough. You are quite safe here, for the present. Mr. Juxon would not think of giving you up now. By and by — the window is not high, Walter, and I shall often be alone with you. I will manage it."

"Is that true? Are you cheating me?" cried the wretched man in broken tones. "No — you are speaking the truth — I know it — God bless you, Mary!" Again he closed his eyes and drew one or two long deep breaths.

Strange to say, the blessing the miserable convict called down upon her was sweet to Mary Goddard, sweeter than anything she remembered for a long time. She had perhaps done wrong in giving him hopes of escaping, but at least he was grateful to her. It was more than she expected, for she remembered

her last meeting with him, and the horrible ingratitude he had then shown her. It seemed to her that his heart had been softened a little; anything was better than that rough indifference he had affected before. Presently he spoke again.

"Not that it makes much difference now, Mary," he said. "I don't think there is much left of me."

"Do not say that, Walter," she answered gently. "Rest now. The more you rest the sooner you will be well again. Try and sleep."

"Sleep — no — I cannot sleep. I have murdered sleep — like Macbeth, Mary, like Macbeth — Do you remember Macbeth?"

"Hush," said Mary Goddard, endeavouring to calm him, though she turned pale at his strange quotation. "Hush —"

"That is to say," said the sick man, heedless of her exhortation and soothing touch, "that is to say, I did not. He was very wide awake, and if I had not been quick, I should never have got off. Ugh! How damp that cellar was, that first night. That is where I got my fever. It is fever, I suppose?" he asked, unable to keep his mind for long in one groove. "What does the doctor say? Has he been here?"

"Yes. He said you would soon be well; but he said you must be kept very quiet. So you must not talk, or I will go away."

"Oh Mary, don't go — don't go! It's like — ha! ha! it's quite like old times, Mary!" He laughed harshly, a hideous, half-delirious laugh.

Mary Goddard shuddered but made a great effort to control herself.

"Yes," she said gently, "it is like old times. Try

and think that it is the old house at Putney, Walter. Do you hear the sparrows chirping, just as they used to do? The curtains are the same colour, too. You used to sleep so quietly at the old house. Try and sleep now. Then you will soon get well. Now, I will sit beside you, but I will not talk any more — there — are you quite comfortable? A little higher? Yes — so. Go to sleep."

Her quiet voice soothed him, and her gentle hands made his rest more easy. She sat down beside him, thinking from his silence that he would really go to sleep; hoping and yet not hoping, revolving in her mind the chances of his escape, so soon as he should be strong enough to attempt it, shuddering at the thought of what his fate must be if he again fell into the hands of the police. She did not know that a detective was at that moment in the house, determined to carry her husband away so soon as the doctor pronounced it possible. Nothing indeed, not even that knowledge could have added much to the burden of her sorrows as she sat there, a small and graceful figure with a sad pathetic face, leaning forward as she sat and gazing drearily at the carpet, where the sunlight crept in beneath the curtains from the bright world without. It seemed to her that the turning point in her existence had come, and that this day must decide all; yet she could not see how it was to be decided, think of it as she might. One thing stood prominent in her thoughts, and she delighted to think of it — the generosity of Charles Juxon. From first to last, from the day when she had frankly told him her story and he had accepted it and refused to let it bring any difference to his friendship for her, down to this present time, when

after being basely attacked by her own husband, he had nobly brought the wretch home and was caring for him as for one of his own blood — through all and in spite of all, the squire had shown the same unassuming but unfailing generosity. She asked herself, as she sat beside the sick man, whether there were many like Charles Juxon in the world. There was the vicar, but the case was very different. He too had been kind and generous from the first; but he had not asked her to marry him — she blushed at the thought — he had not loved her. If Charles Juxon loved her, his generosity to Goddard was all the greater.

She could not tell whether she loved him, because her ideas were what the world calls simple, and what, in heaven, would be called good. Her husband was alive; none the less so because he had been taken away and separated from her by the law — he was alive, and now was brought face to face with her again. While he was living, she did not suppose it possible to love another, for she was very simple. She said to herself truly that she had a very high esteem for the squire and that he was the best friend she had in the world; that to lose him would be the most terrible of imaginable losses; that she was deeply indebted to him, and she even half unconsciously allowed that if she were free she might marry him. There was no harm in that, she knew very well. She owed her own husband no longer either respect or affection, even while she still felt pity for him. Her esteem at least, she might give to another; nay, she owed it, and if she had refused Charles Juxon her friendship, she would have called herself the most ungrateful of women. If ever man deserved respect, esteem and friendship, it was the squire.

Even in the present anxiety she thought of him, for his conduct seemed the only bright spot in the gloom of her thoughts; and she sincerely rejoiced that he had escaped unhurt. Had any harm come to him, she would have been, if it were possible, more miserable than she now was. But he was safe and sound, and doing his best to help her — doing more than she knew, in fact, at that very moment. There was at least something to be thankful for.

Goddard stirred again, and opened his eyes.

"Mary," he said faintly, "they won't catch me after all."

"No, Walter," said she, humouring him. "Sleep quietly, for no one will disturb you."

"I am going where nobody can catch me. I am dying — "

"Oh, Walter!" cried Mary Goddard, "you must not speak like that. You will be better soon. The doctor is expected every moment."

"He had better make haste," said the sick man with something of the roughness he had shown at their first meetings. "It is no use, Mary. I have been thinking about it. I have been mad for — for very long, I am sure. I want to die, Mary. Nobody can catch me if I die — I shall be safe then. You will be safe too — that is a great thing."

His voice had a strange and meditative tone in it, which frightened his wife, as she stood close beside him. She could not speak, for her excitement and fear had the mastery of her tongue.

"I have been thinking about it — I am not good for much, now — Mary — I never was. It will do some good if I die — just because I shall be out of the way. It will be the only good thing I ever did for you."

"Oh Walter," cried his wife in genuine distress, "don't — don't! Think — you must not die so — think of — of the other world, Walter — you must not die so!"

Goddard smiled faintly — scornfully, his wife thought.

"I daresay I shall not die till to-morrow, or next day — but I will not live," he said with sudden energy. "Do you understand me, I will not live! Bah!" he cried, falling back upon his pillow, "the grapes are sour — I can't live if I would. Oh yes, I know all about that — my sins. Well, I am sorry for them. I am sorry, Mary. But it is very little good — people always laugh at — deathbed repentance — "

He stopped and his thoughts seemed wandering. Mary Goddard gave him something to drink and tried to calm him. But he moved restlessly, though feebly.

"Softly, softly," he murmured again. "He is coming — close to me. Get ready — now — no not yet, yes — now. Ugh!" yelled Goddard, suddenly springing up, his eyes starting from his head. "Ugh! the dog — oh!"

"Hush, Walter," cried his wife, pushing him back. "Hush — no one will hurt you."

"What — is that you, Mary?" asked the sick man, trembling violently. Then he laughed harshly. "I was off again. Pshaw! I did not really mean to hurt him — he need not have set that beast at me. He did not catch me though — Mary, I am going to die — will you pray for me? You are a good woman — somebody will hear your prayers, I daresay. Do, Mary — I shall feel better somehow, though I daresay it is very foolish of me."

"No, Walter — not foolish, not foolish. Would you like me to call Mr. Ambrose? he is a clergyman — he is in the house."

"No, no. You Mary, you — nobody will hear anybody else's prayers — for me — for poor me — "

"Try and pray with me, Walter," said Mary Goddard, very quietly. She seemed to have an unnatural strength given to her in that hour of distress and horror. She knelt down by the bedside and took his wounded hand in hers, tenderly, and she prayed aloud in such words as she could find.

Below, in the study, the detective had just finished telling his tale to the squire, and the wheels of Doctor Longstreet's dog-cart ground upon the gravel outside. The two men looked at each other for a moment, and Mr. Juxon spoke first.

"That is the doctor," said he. "I will ask you to have patience for five minutes, Mr. Booley. He will give you his opinion. I am still very much shocked at what you have told me — I had no idea what had happened."

"No — I suppose not," answered Mr. Booley calmly. "If you will ask the medical man to step in here for one moment, I will explain matters to him. I don't think he will differ much from me."

"Very well," returned the squire, leaving the room. He went to meet Doctor Longstreet, intending to warn him of the presence of Mr. Booley, and meaning to entreat his support for the purpose of keeping Goddard in the house until he should be recovered. He passed through the library and exchanged a few words with Mr. Ambrose, explaining that the doctor had come. Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose were sitting on opposite sides of the fireplace in

huge chairs, with a mournful air of resigned expectation upon their worthy faces. The detective remained alone in the study.

Meanwhile John Short had refreshed himself from his fatigues, and came down stairs in search of some breakfast. He had recovered from his excitement and was probably the only one who thought of eating, as he was also the one least closely concerned in what was occurring. Instead of going to the library he went to the dining-room, and, seeing no one about, entered the study from the door which on that side connected the two rooms. To his surprise he saw Mr. Booley standing before the fireplace, his hands in his pockets and his feet wide apart. He had not the least idea who he was.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, staring hard at him.

"Yes," said Mr. Booley, who took him for the physician whom he expected. "I am George Booley of the detective service. I was expecting you, sir. There is very little to be said. My time, as I told Mr. Juxon, is very valuable. I must have Goddard out of the house by to-morrow afternoon at the latest. Now, doctor, it is of no use your talking to me about fever and all that — "

John had stood with his mouth open, staring in blank astonishment at the detective, unable to find words in which to question the man. At last he got his breath.

"What in the world are you talking about?" he asked slowly. "Are you a raving lunatic — or what are you?"

"Come, come, doctor," said Mr. Booley in persuasive accents, "none of that with me, you know. If the man must be moved — why he must, that is all, and you must make it possible, somehow."

"You are crazy!" exclaimed John. "I am not the doctor, to begin with —"

"Not the doctor!" cried Mr. Booley. "Then who are you? I beg your pardon, I am sure —"

"I am John Short," said John, quickly, heedless of the fact that his name conveyed no idea whatever to the mind of the detective. He cared little, for he began to comprehend the situation, and he fled precipitately into the library, leaving Mr. Booley alone to wait for the coming of the real physician. But in the library a fresh surprise awaited him; there he found Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose seated in solemn silence opposite to each other. He had not suspected their presence in the house, but he was relieved to see them — anything was a relief at that moment.

"Mr. Ambrose," he said hurriedly, "there is a detective in the next room who means to carry off that poor man at once — as he is — sick — dying perhaps — it must be prevented!"

"A detective!" cried the vicar and his wife in the same breath.

"My dear John," said the vicar immediately afterwards, "where is he? I will reason with him."

"Augustin," said Mrs. Ambrose with extreme severity, "it is barbarous. I will go upstairs. If he enters the room it shall be across my body."

"Do, my dear," replied the vicar in great excitement, and not precisely appreciating the proposition to which he gave so willing an assent.

"Of course I will," said his wife, who had already reached the door. From which it appears that Mrs. Ambrose was a brave woman. She passed rapidly up the staircase to Goddard's room, but she paused as she laid her hand upon the latch. From within

she could hear Mary Goddard's voice, praying aloud, as she had never heard any one pray before. She paused and listened, hesitating to interrupt the unhappy lady in such a moment. Moreover, though her goodwill was boundless, she had not any precise idea how to manage the defence. But as she stood there, the thought that the detective might at any moment follow her was predominant. The voice within the room paused for an instant and Mrs. Ambrose entered, raising one finger to her lips as though expecting that Mary Goddard would speak to her. But Mary was not looking, and at first did not notice the intrusion. She knelt by the bedside, her face buried in the coverlet, her hands clasped and clasping the sick man's wounded hand.

Goddard's face was pale but not deathlike, and his breathing seemed regular and gentle; but his eyes were almost closed and he seemed not aware that any one had entered. Mrs. Ambrose was struck by his appearance which was greatly changed since she had left him half an hour earlier, his face purple and his harsh moaning continuing unceasingly. She said to herself that he was probably better. There was all the more reason for warning Mary Goddard of the new danger that awaited him. She shut the door and locked it and withdrew the key. At the sound Mary looked up — then rose to her feet with a sad look of reproach, as though not wishing to be disturbed. But Mrs. Ambrose came quickly to her side, and glancing once at Goddard, to see whether he was unconscious, she led her away from the bed.

"My dear," she said very kindly, but in a voice trembling with excitement, "I had to come. There are detectives in the house, clamouring to take

him away — but I will protect you — they shall not do it."

Mary Goddard started and her eyes stared wildly at her friend. But presently the look of resigned sadness returned, and a faint and mournful smile flickered on her lips.

"I think it is all over," she said. "He is still alive — but he will not live till they come."

Then she bit her lip tightly, and all the features of her face trembled a little. The tears would rise spasmodically, though they were only tears of pity, not of love. Mrs. Ambrose, the severe, the stern, the eternally vigilant Mrs. Ambrose, sat down by the window; she put her arm about Mary Goddard's waist and took her upon her knee as though she had been a little child and laid her head upon her breast, comforting her as best she could. And their tears flowed down and mingled together, for many minutes.

But once more the sick man's voice was heard; both women started to their feet and went to his side.

"Mary Goddard! Mary Goddard! Let me in!" he moaned faintly.

"It is I — here I am, Walter, dear Walter — I am with you," answered Mary, raising him and putting her arm about his neck, while Mrs. Ambrose arranged the pillows behind him. He opened his eyes as though with a great effort.

Some one knocked softly at the door. Mrs. Ambrose left the bedside quickly and put the key in the lock.

"Who is there?" she asked, before she opened.

"I — John. Please let me in."

Mrs. Ambrose opened and John entered, very pale; she locked the door again after him. He stood still

looking with astonishment at Mrs. Goddard who still propped the sick man in her arms and hardly noticed him.

"Why — ?" he ejaculated and then checked himself, or rather was checked by Mrs. Ambrose's look. Then he spoke to her in a whisper.

"There is an awful row going on between the doctor and the detective," he said hurriedly under his breath. "They are coming upstairs and the vicar and Mr. Juxon are trying to part them — I don't know what they are not saying to each other — "

"Hush," replied Mrs. Ambrose, "do not disturb him — he was conscious again just now. This may be the crisis — he may recover. The door is locked — try and prevent anybody — that is, the detective, from coming in. They will not dare to break open the door in Mr. Juxon's house."

"But why is Mrs. Goddard here?" asked John unable to control his curiosity any longer. He did not mean that she should hear, but as she laid Goddard's head gently upon the pillows, trying to soothe him to rest again, if rest it were, she looked up and met John's eyes.

"Because he is my husband," said she very quietly.

John laid his hand on Mrs. Ambrose's arm in utmost bewilderment and looked at her as though to ask if it were true. She nodded gravely. Before John had time to recover himself from the shock of the news, footsteps were heard outside, and the loud altercation of angry voices. John Short leaned his shoulder against the door and put his foot against it below, expecting an attack.

CHAPTER XXIV.

When Mr. Ambrose undertook to reason with the detective he went directly towards the study where John said the man was waiting. But Mr. Booley was beginning to suspect that the doctor was not coming to speak with him as the squire had promised, and after hesitating for a few moments followed John into the library, determining to manage matters himself. As he opened the door he met Mr. Ambrose coming towards him, and at the same moment Mr. Juxon and Doctor Longstreet entered from the opposite end of the long room. The cheerful and active physician was talking in a rather excited tone.

"My dear sir," said he, "I cannot pretend to say that the man will or will not recover. I must see him again. Things look quite differently by daylight, and six or seven hours may make all the change in the world. To say that he can be moved to-day or even to-morrow, is absurd. I will stake my reputation as a practitioner — Hulloa!"

The exclamation was elicited by Mr. Booley, who had pushed past Mr. Ambrose and stood confronting the doctor with a look which was intended to express a combination of sarcasm, superior cunning and authority.

"This is Mr. Booley," explained the squire. "Doctor Longstreet will tell you what he has been telling me," he added turning to the detective.

"I must see this man instantly," said the latter somewhat roughly. "I believe I am being trifled with, and I will not submit to it. No, sir, I will not be trifled with, I assure you! I must see this man at once. It is absolutely necessary to identify him."

"And I say," said Doctor Longstreet with equal firmness, "that I must see him first, in order to judge whether you can see him or not—"

"It is for me to judge of that," returned Mr. Booley, with more haste than logic.

"After you have seen him, you cannot judge whether you ought to see him or not," retorted Doctor Longstreet growing red in the face. The detective attempted to push past him. At this moment John Short hastily left the room and fled upstairs to warn Mrs. Ambrose of what was happening.

"Really," said Mr. Ambrose, making a vain attempt to stop the course of events, "this is very unwarrantable."

"Unwarrantable!" cried Mr. Booley. "Unwarrantable, indeed! I have the warrant in my pocket. Mr. Juxon, sir, I fear I must insist."

"Permit me," said Mr. Juxon, planting his square and sturdy form between the door and the detective. "You may certainly insist, but you must begin by listening to reason."

Charles Juxon had been accustomed to command others for the greater part of his life, and though he was generally the most unobtrusive and gentle of men, when he raised his voice in a tone of authority his words carried weight. His blue eyes stared hard at Mr. Booley, and there was something imposing in his square head—even in the unruffled smoothness

of his brown hair. Mr. Booley paused and discontentedly thrust his hands into his pockets.

"Well?" he said.

"Simply this," answered the squire. "You may accompany us to the door of the room; you may wait with me, while Doctor Longstreet goes in to look at the patient. If the man is unconscious you may go in and see him. If he chances to be in a lucid interval, you must wait until he is unconscious again. It will not be long. That is perfectly reasonable."

"Perfectly," echoed Mr. Ambrose, biting his long upper lip and glaring as fiercely at Mr. Booley as though he had said it all himself.

"Absolutely reasonable," added Doctor Longstreet.

"Well, we will try it," said the detective moodily. "But I warn you I will not be trifled with."

"Nobody is trifling with you," answered the squire coldly. "This way if you please." And he forthwith led the way upstairs, followed by Mr. Booley, the physician and the vicar.

Before they reached the door, however, the discussion broke out again. Mr. Booley had been held in check for a few moments by Mr. Juxon's determined manner, but as he followed the squire he began to regret that he had yielded so far and he made a fresh assertion of his rights.

"I cannot see why you want to keep me outside," he said. "What difference can it make, I should like to know?"

"You will have to take my word for it that it does make a difference," said the doctor, testily. "If you frighten the man, he will die. Now then, here we are."

"I don't like your tone, sir," said Booley angrily,

again trying to push past the physician. "I think I must insist, after all. I will go in with you — I tell you I will, sir — don't stop me."

Doctor Longstreet, who was fifteen or twenty years older than the detective but still strong and active, gripped his arm quickly, and held him back.

"If you go into that room without my permission, and if the man dies of fright, I will have an action brought against you for manslaughter," he said in a loud voice.

"And I will support it," said the squire. "I am justice of the peace here, and what is more, I am in my own house. Do not think your position will protect you."

Again Mr. Juxon's authoritative tone checked the detective, who drew back, making some angry retort which no one heard. The squire tried the door and finding it locked, knocked softly, not realising that every word of the altercation had been heard within.

"Who is there?" asked John, who though he had heard all that had been said was uncertain of the issue.

"Let in Doctor Longstreet," said the squire's voice.

But meanwhile Mrs. Ambrose and Mary Goddard were standing on each side of the sick man. He must have heard the noises outside, and they conveyed some impression to his brain.

"Mary, Mary!" he groaned indistinctly. "Save me — they are coming — I cannot get away — softly, he is coming — now — I shall just catch him as he goes by — Ugh! that dog — oh! oh! — "

With a wild shriek, the wretched man sprang up, upon his knees, his eyes starting out, his face trans-

figured with horror. For one instant he remained thus, half-supported by the two terror-struck women; then with a groan his head drooped forward upon his breast and he fell back heavily upon the pillows, breathing still but quite unconscious.

Doctor Longstreet entered at that moment and ran to his side. But when he saw him he paused. Even Mrs. Ambrose was white with horror, and Mary Goddard stood motionless, staring down at her husband, her hands gripping the disordered coverlet convulsively.

Mr. Juxon had entered, too, while Mr. Ambrose remained outside with the detective, who had been frightened into submission by the physician's last threat. The squire saw what was happening and paced the room in the greatest agitation, wringing his hands together and biting his lips. John had closed the door and came to the foot of the bed and looked at Goddard's face. After a pause, Doctor Longstreet spoke.

"We might possibly restore him to consciousness for a moment — "

"Don't!" cried Mary Goddard, starting as though some one had struck her. "That is — " she added quickly, in broken tones, "unless he can live!"

"No," answered the physician, gravely, but looking hard at the unhappy woman. "He is dying."

Goddard's staring eyes were glazed and white. Twice and three times he gasped for breath, and then lay quite still. It was all over. Mary gazed at his dead face for one instant, then a faint smile parted her lips: she raised one hand to her forehead as though dazed.

"He is safe now," she murmured very faintly.

Her limbs relaxed suddenly, and she fell straight backwards. Charles Juxon, who was watching her, sprang forward and caught her in his arms. Then he bore her from the room, swiftly, while John Short who was as white and speechless as the rest opened the door.

"You may go in now," said Juxon as he passed Booley and Mr. Ambrose in the passage, with his burden in his arms. A few steps farther on he met Holmes the butler, who carried a telegram on a salver.

"For Mr. Short, sir," said the impassive servant, not appearing to notice anything strange in the fact that his master was carrying the inanimate body of Mary Goddard.

"He is in there — go in," said Juxon hurriedly as he went on his way.

The detective and the vicar had already entered the room where the dead convict was lying. All stood around the bed, gazing at his pale face as he lay.

"A telegram for Mr. Short," said Holmes from the door. John started and took the despatch from the butler's hands. He hastily tore it open, glanced at the contents and thrust it into his pocket. Every one looked round.

"What is it, John?" whispered the vicar, who was nearest to him.

"Oh — nothing. I am first in the Tripos, that is all," answered John very simply, as though it were not a matter of the least consequence.

Through all those months of untiring labour, through privation and anxiety, through days of weariness and nights of study, he had looked forward to the triumph, often doubting but never despairing. But he had little guessed that the news

of victory would reach him at such a moment. It was nothing, he said; and indeed as he stood with the group of pale and awe-struck spectators by the dead man's bed, he felt that the greatest thing which had ever happened to him was as nothing compared with the tragedy of which he had witnessed the last act.

It was all over. There was nothing more to be said; the convict had escaped the law in the end, at the very moment when the hand of the law was upon him. Thomas Reid, the conservative sexton, buried him "four by six by two," grumbling at the parish depth as of yore, and a simple stone cross marked his nameless grave. There it stands to this day in the churchyard of Billingsfield, Essex, in the shadow of the ancient abbey.

All these things happened a long time ago, according to Billingsfield reckoning, but the story of the tramp who attacked Squire Juxon and was pulled down by the bloodhound is still told by the villagers, and Mr. Gall, being once in good cheer, vaguely hinted that he knew who the tramp was; but from the singular reticence he has always shown in the matter, and from the prosperity which has attended his constabulary career, it may well be believed that he has a life interest in keeping his counsel. Indeed as it is nearly ten years since Mr. Reid buried the poor tramp, it is possible that Mr. Gall's memory may be already failing in regard to events which occurred at so remote a date.

It was but an incident, though it was perhaps the only incident of any interest which ever occurred in Billingsfield; but until it reached its termination it

agitated the lives of the quiet people at the vicarage, at the cottage and at the Hall as violently as human nature can be moved. It was long, too, before those who had witnessed the scene of Goddard's death could shake off the impression of those awful last moments. Yet time does all things wonderful and in the course of not many months there remained of Goddard's memory only a great sense of relief that he was no longer alive. Mary Goddard, indeed, was very ill for a long time; and but for Mrs. Ambrose's tender care of her, might have followed her husband within a few weeks of his death. But the good lady never left her, until she was herself again — absolutely herself, saving that as time passed and her deep wounds healed her sorrows were forgotten, and she seemed to bloom out into a second youth.

So it came to pass that within two years Charles Juxon once more asked her to be his wife. She hesitated long — fully half an hour, the squire thought; but in the end she put out her small hand and laid it in his, and thanked God that a man so generous and true, and whom she so honestly loved, was to be her husband as well as her friend and protector. Charles James Juxon smoothed his hair with his other hand, and his blue eyes were a little moistened.

"God bless you, Mary," he said; and that was all.

Then the Reverend Augustin Ambrose married them in the church of Saint Mary's, between Christmas and New Year's Day; and the wedding-party consisted of Mrs. Ambrose and Eleanor Goddard and John Short, Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. And again years passed by, and Nellie grew in beauty as John grew in reputation; and Nellie had both brothers and sisters, as she had longed to have, and

to her, their father was as her own; so that there was much harmony and peace and goodwill towards men in Billingsfield Hall. John came often and stayed long, and was ever welcome; for though Mary Goddard's youth returned with the daffodils and the roses of the first spring after Walter's death, John's fleeting passion returned not, and perhaps its place was better taken. Year by year, as he came to refresh himself from hard work with a breath of the country air, he saw the little girl grow to the young maiden of sixteen, and he saw her beauty ripen again to the fulness of womanhood; and at last, when she was one and twenty years of age he in his turn put out his hand and asked her to take him — which she did, for better or worse, but to all appearances for better. For John Short had prospered mightily in the world, and had come to think his first great success as very small and insignificant as compared with what he had done since. But his old simplicity was in him yet, and was the cause of much of his prosperity, as it generally is when it is found together with plenty of brains. It was doubtless because he was so very simple that when he found that he loved Eleanor Goddard he did not hesitate to ask the convict's daughter to be his wife. His interview with Mr. Juxon was characteristic.

"You know what you are doing, John?" asked the squire. He always called him John, now.

"Perfectly," replied the scholar, "I am doing precisely what my betters have done before me with such admirable result."

"Betters?"

"You. You knew about it all and you married her mother. I know all about it, and I wish to marry herself."

"You know that she never heard the story?"

"Yes. She never shall."

"No, John — she never must. Well, all good go with you."

So Charles Juxon gave his consent. And Mary Juxon consented too; but for the first time in many years the tears rose again to her eyes, and she laid her hand on John's arm, as they walked together in the park.

"Oh, John," she said, "do you think it is right — for you yourself?"

"Of course I think so," quoth John stoutly.

"You John — with your reputation, your success, with the whole world at your feet — you ought not to marry the daughter of — of such a man."

"My dear Mrs. Juxon," said John Short, "is she not your daughter as well as his? Pray, pray do not mention that objection. I assure you I have thought it all over. There is really nothing more to be said, which I have not said to myself. Dear Mrs. Juxon — do say Yes!"

"You are very generous, John, as well as great," she answered looking up to his face. "Well — I have nothing to say. You must do as you think best. I am sure you will be kind to Nellie, for I have known you for ten years — you may tell her I am very glad — " she stopped, her eyes brimming over with tears.

"Do you remember how angry I was once, when you told me to go and talk to Nellie?" said John. "It was just here, too — "

Mary Juxon laughed happily and brushed the tears from her eyes. So it was all settled.

Once more the Reverend Augustin Ambrose united

two loving hearts before the altar of Saint Mary's. He was well stricken in years, and his hair and beard were very white. Mrs. Ambrose also grew more imposing with each succeeding season, but her face was softer than of old, and her voice more gentle. For the sorrow and suffering of a few days had drawn together the hearts of all those good people with strong bands, and a deep affection had sprung up between them all. The good old lady felt as though Mary Juxon were her daughter — Mary Juxon, by whom she had stood in the moment of direst trial and terror, whom she had tended in illness and cheered in recovery. And the younger woman's heart had gone out towards her, feeling how good a thing it is to find a friend in need, and learning to value in her happiness the wealth of human kindness she had found in her adversity.

They are like one family, now, having a common past, a common present, and a common future, and there is no dissension among them. Honest and loyal men and women may meet day after day, and join hands and exchange greetings, without becoming firm friends, for the very reason that they have no need of each other. But if the storm of a great sorrow breaks among them and they call out to each other for help, and bear the brunt of the weather hand in hand, the seed of a deeper affection is brought into their midst; and when the tempest is past the sweet flower of friendship springs up in the moistened furrows of their lives.

So those good people in the lonely parish of Billingsfield gathered round Mary Goddard, as they called her then, and round poor little Nellie, and did their best to protect the mother and the child

from harm and undeserved suffering; and afterwards, when it was all over, and there was nothing more to be feared in the future, they looked into each other's faces and felt that they were become as brothers and sisters, and that so long as they should live — may it be long indeed! — there was a bond between them which could never be broken. So it was that Mrs. Ambrose's face softened and her voice was less severe than it had been.

Mary Juxon is the happiest of women; happy in her husband, in her eldest daughter, in John Short and in the little children with bright faces and ringing voices who nestle at her knee or climb over the sturdy sailor-squire, and pull his great beard and make him laugh. They will never know, any more than Nellie knew, all that their mother suffered; and as she looks upon them and strokes their long fair hair and listens to their laughter, she says to herself that it was perhaps almost worth while to have been dragged down towards the depths of shame for the sake of at last enjoying such pride and glory of happy motherhood.

THE END.

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